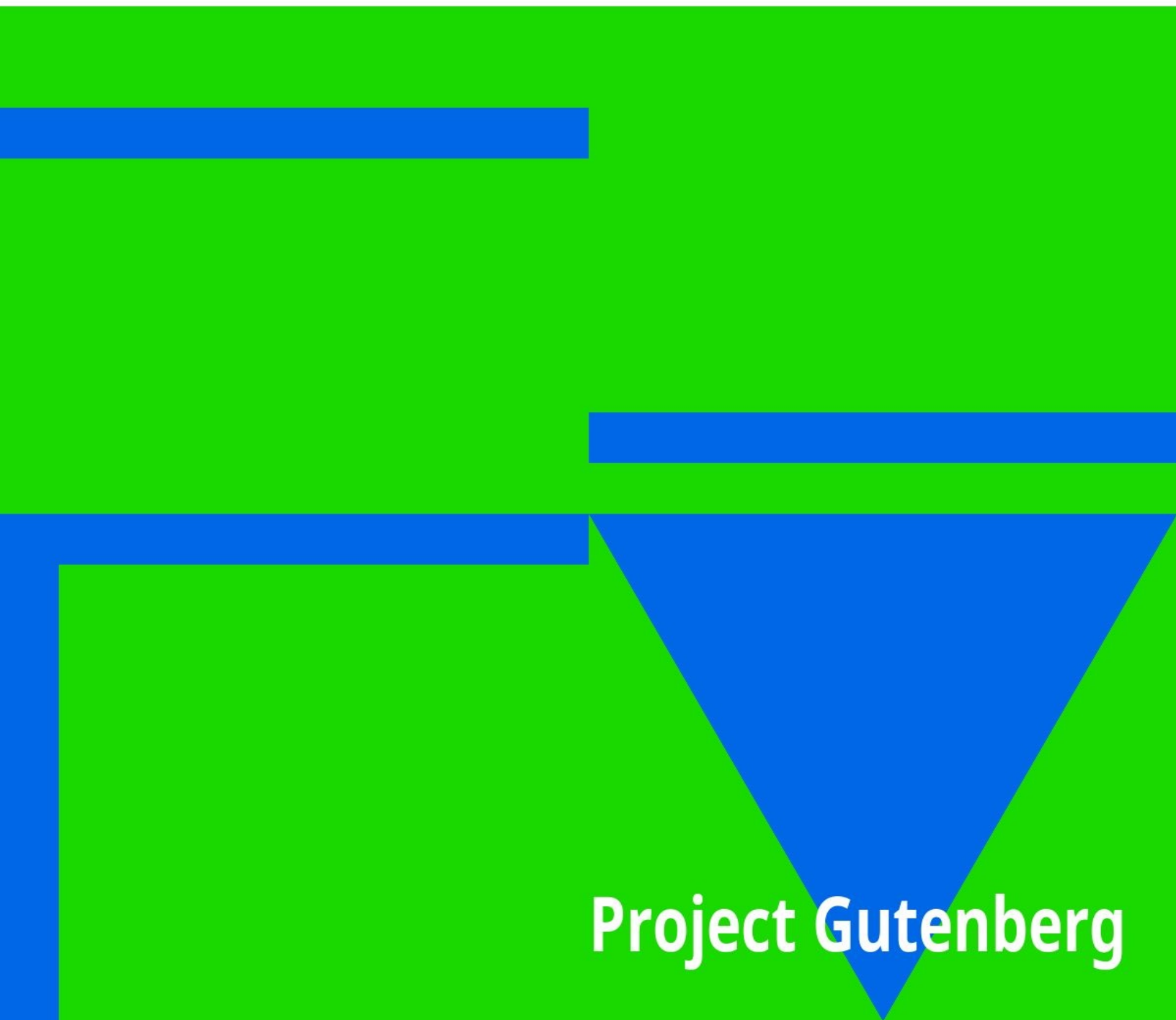


Dross

Henry Seton Merriman



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STUDY THE PAPERS ON THE TABLE. AND LUCILLE STANDING
BEFORE MY DESK WAS LOOKING DOWN AT MY BENT HEAD,
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Cover Page

DROSS

***By* HENRY SETON MERRIMAN**
AUTHOR OF
“WITH EDGED TOOLS,” “THE SOWERS,” ETC.

Decorative Image

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Chapter I

Mushrooms

"La célébrité est comme le feu, qui brûle de près et illumine de loin."

Under a glorious sky, in the year 1869, Paris gathered to rejoice in the centenary of the birth of the First Napoleon. A gathering this of mushroom nobility, soldiery and diplomacy, to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the greatest mushroom that ever sprang to life in the hotbed of internecine strife.

"Adventurers all," said John Turner, the great Paris banker, with whom I was in the Church of the Invalides; "and yonder," he added, indicating the Third Napoleon, "is the cleverest."

We had pushed our way into the gorgeous church, and now rubbed elbows with some that wore epaulettes on peaceful shoulders. There were ladies present, too. Did not the fair beings contribute to the rise and fall of that marvellous Second Empire? Representatives of almost every European power paid homage that day to the memory of a little Corsican officer of artillery.

As for me, I went from motives of curiosity, as, no doubt, went many others, if indeed all had so good a call. In my neighbourhood, for instance, stood a stout gentleman in court uniform, who wept aloud whenever the organ permitted his grief to be audible.

"Who is that?" I inquired of my companion.

"A Legitimist, who would perhaps accept a Napoleonic post," replied John Turner, in his stout and simple way.

"And is he weeping because the man who was born a hundred years ago is dead?"

"No! He is weeping because that man's nephew may perchance note his emotion."

One could never tell how dense or how acute John Turner really was. His round, fat face was always immobile and fleshy—no wrinkle, no movement of lip or

eyelid, ever gave the cue to his inmost thought. He was always good-natured and indifferent—a middle-aged bachelor who had found life not hollow, but full—of food.

Nature having given me long legs (wherewith to give the slip to my responsibilities, and also to the bailiffs, as many of my female relatives have enjoyed saying), I could look over the heads of the majority of people present, and so saw the Emperor Napoleon III for the first time in my life. The mind is, after all, a smaller thing than those who deny the existence of that which is beyond their comprehension would have us believe. At that moment I forgot to think of all that lay behind those dull, extinguished eyes. I forgot that this was a maker of history, and one who will be placed by chroniclers, writing in the calm of the twentieth century, only second to his greater uncle among remarkable Frenchmen, and merely wondered whether Napoleon III perceived the somewhat obtrusive emotion of my neighbour in the court uniform.

But a keener observer than myself could scarce have discerned the information on the still, pale features of the Emperor, who, indeed, in his implacability always reminded me more of my own countrymen than of the French. The service was proceeding with that cunning rise and fall of voice and music which, I take it, has won not a few emotional souls back to the Mother Church. Suddenly John Turner chuckled in a way that fat people have.

"Laughing at your d—d piano-case," he explained.

I had told him shortly before how I had boarded the Calais boat at Dover in the form and semblance of a piano, snugly housed in one of Messrs. Erard's cases, while my servant engaged in pleasant converse on the quay the bailiff who had been set to watch for me: this, while they were actually slinging me on board. The picture of the surprise of my fellow-passengers when Loomer gravely unscrewed me and I emerged from my travelling-carriage in mid-channel had pleased John Turner vastly. Indeed, he told the story to the end of his days, and even brought that end within hail at times by an over-indulgence in apoplectic mirth. He chuckled at it now in the midst of this solemn service. But I, more easily moved perhaps by outward show and pomp, could only think of our surroundings. The excitement of giving my creditors the slip was a thing of the past; for those were rapid days, and I no laggard, as many took care to tell me, on the heel of the flying moment.

The ceremony in which we were taking part was indeed strange enough to rivet

the attention of any who witnessed it—strange, I take it, as any historical scene of a century that saw the rise and fall of Napoleon I. Strange beyond belief, that this dynasty should arise from ashes as cold as those that Europe heaped on St. Helena's dead, to celebrate the birth of its founder!

Who would have dared to prophesy fifty years earlier that a second Emperor should some day sit upon the throne of France? Who would have ventured to foretell that this capricious people, loathing as they did in 1815 the name of Buonaparte, should one day choose by universal suffrage another of that family to rule over them?

Few of those assembled in the great tomb were of devout enough mind to take much heed of the service now proceeding at the altar, where the priest droned and the incense rose in slow clouds towards the dome. We all stared at each other freely enough, and in truth the faces of many, not to mention bright uniforms and brilliant names, warranted the abstraction from holy thought and fervour. The old soldiers lining the aisle had fought, some at Inkerman, some at Solferino, some in Mexico, that land of ill-omen. The generals of all nations, mixing freely in the crowd, bowed grimly enough to each other. They had met before.

It was indeed a strange jumble of prince and pauper, friend and foe, patriot and adventurer. And the face that drew my gaze oftenest was one as still and illegible now as it was on the morning of January 11, four years later, when I bowed before it at Chiselhurst.

The Third Napoleon, with eyes that none could read—a quiet, self-possessed enigma—passed down the aisle between his ranked soldiers, and the religious part of the day's festivities was over. Paris promised to be *en fête* while daylight lasted, and at night a display of fireworks of unprecedented splendour was to close the festive celebration. There is no lighter heart than that which beats within the narrow waistcoat of the little Parisian bourgeois, unless indeed it be that in the trim bodice of madame his wife; and even within the church walls we could hear the sound of merriment in the streets.

When the Emperor had gone we all moved towards the doors of the church, congratulating each other, embracing each other, laughing and weeping all in one breath.

One near to me seized my hand.

"You are English!" he cried.

"I am."

"Then embrace me."

We embraced.

"Waterloo"—he called it Vatterlo—"is forgotten. It is buried in the Crimea," cried this emotional son of Gaul. He was a stout man who had partaken of garlic at déjeuner.

"It is," I answered.

And we embraced again. Then I got away from him. It was gratifying but inexpedient to be an Englishman at that moment, and John Turner, whose clothes were made in Paris, silently denied me and edged away. Others seemed desirous of burying Waterloo also, but I managed the obsequies of that great victory with a shake of the hand.

"Vive l'Empereur!" they cried. "Long live Napoleon!"

And I shouted as loud as any. Whatever one may think, it is always wise to agree with the mob.

On the steps of the church I found John Turner awaiting me.

"Finished embracing your new-found friend?" he asked me, with a shortness which may have been a matter of breath. At all events, it was habitual with this well-fed philosopher.

"We were forgetting Waterloo," I answered.

At that moment a merry laugh behind us made me turn. It was not directed towards myself, and was doubtless raised by some incident which had escaped our notice. The mere fact that this voice was raised in merriment did not make me wheel round on my heel as if I had been shot. It was the voice itself—some note of sympathy which I seemed to have always known and yet never to have heard until this moment. A strange thing—the reader will think—to happen to a man in his thirties, who had knocked about the world, doing but little good therein, as some are ready and even anxious to relate.

Strange it may be, but it was true. I seemed to have known that voice all my life

—and it was only the merry laugh of a heedless girl.

Has any listened to the prattle of the schoolroom without hearing at odd moments the tone of some note that is not girlish—the voice of the woman speaking gravely through the chatter of the child?

I seemed to hear that note now, and turning, found the owner of the voice within touch of me. She was tall and slim, with a certain fresh immaturity, which was like the scent of the first spring flowers in my own Norfolk woods at home. Flower-like, too, was her face—somewhat long and narrow, with a fair flush on it of youth, health and happiness. The merriest eyes in the world were looking laughingly into the face of an old gentleman at her side, smiling, happy eyes of innocent maidenhood. And yet here again I saw the woman in the girl. I saw a gracious lady, knowing life, and being yet pure, having learned of good and evil only to remember the good. For the knowledge of evil is like vaccine—it causes disturbance only when hidden impurity awaits it.

"Come," said John Turner, taking my arm, "no one else wants to forget Waterloo."

I went with him a little. Then I paused.

"Who is the young lady coming down the steps behind us?"

John Turner, looking over his shoulder, gave a grunt.

"Old De Clericy and his daughter," he answered. "One of the families that are too old to keep pace with the times."

"WHO IS THE YOUNG LADY COMING DOWN THE STEPS BEHIND US?"

"WHO IS THE YOUNG LADY COMING DOWN THE STEPS BEHIND US?"

We walked on a little.

"There is a chance for you—wants a secretary," muttered my companion.

"Does he?" I exclaimed, stopping. "Then introduce me."

"Not I."

"Why?"

"Can't introduce a man who came across in a piano-case," he answered, with a laugh, which made me remember that this was a man of station and some

standing in Paris, while I was but a vagabond and ne'er-do-well.

"Then I'll introduce myself," I said, hastily.

John Turner shrugged his broad shoulders and walked on. As for me, I stopped and on the impulse of the moment turned.

Monsieur and Mademoiselle de Clericy were coming slowly towards me, and more than one looked at the fair young girl with a franker admiration than I cared about, while she was happily unconscious of it. It would seem that she must lately have left the convent, for the guileless pink and white of that pure life lingered on her face, while her eyes danced with an excitement out of all proportion to the moment. What should she know of Napoleon I, and how rejoice for France when she knew but little of the dark days through which the great general had brought that land?

I edged my way towards them through the crowd without pausing to reflect what I was about to do. I had run away from my creditors, it is true, but was not called upon to work for my living. The Howards had not done much of that, so far as I knew; though many of my ancestors, if one may credit the old portraits at home, had fought for rights, and even wrongs, with considerable spirit and success.

The throng was a well-dressed one, and consequently of a cold and evil temper if one worked against it. I succeeded, however, in reaching Monsieur de Clericy and touched his arm. He turned hastily, as one possessing foes as well as friends, and showed me a most benevolent countenance, kindly and sympathetic even when accosted by a total stranger.

"Monsieur de Clericy?" I asked.

He peered up at me with pleasant, short-sighted eyes while returning my salute.

"But yes. Am I happy enough to be able to do anything for Monsieur?"

He spoke in a high, thin voice that was almost childlike, and a feeling of misgiving ran through me that one so young and inexperienced as Mademoiselle de Clericy should be abroad on such a day with no better escort than this old man.

"Pardon my addressing you," I said, "but I hear that you are seeking a secretary. I only ask permission to call at your hotel and apply for the post."

"But, mon grand monsieur," he said with a delightful playfulness, spreading out his hands in recognition of my height and east-country bulk, "this is no time to talk of affairs. To-day we are at pleasure."

"Not all, Monsieur; some are busy enough," I replied, handing him my card, which he held close to his eyes, after the manner of one who has never possessed long or keen sight.

"What determination!" he exclaimed, with an old man's tolerance. "Mon Dieu! these English allies of ours!"

"Well!" he said, after a pause, "if Monsieur honours me with such a request, I shall be in and at your service from ten o'clock to-morrow morning."

He felt in his pocket and handed me a card with courtesy. It was quite refreshing to meet such a man in Paris in 1869—so naïve, so unassuming, so free from that aggressive self-esteem which characterized Frenchmen before the war. Since I had arrived in the capital under the circumstances that amused John Turner so consumedly, I had been tempted to raise my fist in the face of every second flaneur I met on the boulevard.

Again I joined my English friend, who was standing where I had left him, looking around him with a stout, good-natured tolerance.

"Well," he asked, "have you got the situation?"

"No; but I am going to call to-morrow morning at ten o'clock and obtain it."

"Umph!" said John Turner; "I did not know you were such a scoundrel."



Chapter II

Monsieur

"La destinée a deux manières de nous briser; en se refusant à nos désirs et en les accomplissant."

To some the night brings wiser or at all events a second counsel. For myself, however, it has never been so. In the prosecution of such small enterprises as have marked a life no more eventful than those around it, I have always awakened in the morning of the same mind as I was when sleep laid its quiet hand upon me. It seems, moreover, that I have made just as many as but no more mistakes than my neighbours. Taking it likewise as a broad generality, the balance seems, in my experience, to tell quite perceptibly in favour of those who make up their minds and hold to that decision firmly, rather than towards such men as seek counsel of the multitude and trim their sail to the tame breeze of precedent.

"Always go straight for a jump," my father had shouted to me once, years ago, while I sat up in a Norfolk ditch and watched my horse disappear through a gap in the next hedge.

I awoke on the morning after the centenary fêtes without any doubt in my mind—being still determined to seek a situation for which I was unfitted.

Having quarrelled with my father, who obstinately refused to pay a few debts such as no young man living in London could, with self-respect, avoid, I was still in the enjoyment of a small annual income left to me by a mother whom I had never seen—upon whose grave in the old, disused churchyard at Hopton I had indeed been taught to lay a few flowers before I fully realised the meaning of such tribute. That my irate old sire had threatened to cut me off with as near an approach to one shilling as an entail would allow had not given me much anxiety. The dear old gentleman had done so a hundred times before—as early, indeed, as my second term at Cambridge, where he had considerably surprised the waiter at the Bull by a display of honest British wrath.

It was, in all truth, necessary that I should do something—should find one of those occupations (heavily salaried) for which, I make no doubt, as many

incompetent youths seek to-day as twenty-five years ago.

"What you want," John Turner had said, when I explained my position to him, "is no doubt something that will enable a gentleman to live like a lord."

Now, Monsieur de Clericy was probably prepared to give two hundred pounds a year to his secretary. But it was with Mademoiselle—and I did not even know her Christian name—that I was anxious to treat. What would she give?

It was, I remember, a lovely morning. What weather these Napoleons had, from Austerlitz down to the matchless autumn of 1870!

The address printed in the corner of Monsieur de Clericy's card was unknown to me, although I was passably acquainted with the Paris streets. The Rue des Palmiers was, I learnt, across the river, and, my informant added, lay between the boulevard and the Seine. This was a part of the bright city which Haussmann and Napoleon III had as yet left untouched—a quarter of quiet, gloomy streets and narrow alleys. The sun was shining on the gay river as I crossed the bridge of the Holy Fathers, and the water seemed to dance and laugh in the morning air. The flags were still flying, for these jolly Parisians are always loth to take in their bunting. It was, indeed, a gay world in which I moved that morning.

The Hôtel Clericy I found at the end of the Rue des Palmiers, which short street the great house closed. Indeed, the Rue des Palmiers was but an avenue of houses terminated by the gloomy abode of the Clericys. The house was built behind a high stone wall broken only by a railed doorway.

I rang the bell and heard its tinkle far away within the dwelling. A covered way led from the street to the house, and I followed on the heels of the servant, a smart young Parisian, looking curiously at the little garden which in London would have been forlorn and smutty. Here in Paris bright flowers bloomed healthily and a little fountain plashed with that restful monotony which ever suggests the patios of Spain.

The young man was one of those modern servants who know their business.

"Monsieur's name?" he said, sharply.

"Howard."

We were within the dimly lighted hall, with its scent of old carpets and rusting armour, and he led the way upstairs. He threw open the drawing-room door and

mentioned my name in his short, well-trained way. There was but one person in the large room, and she did not hear the man's voice; for she was laughing herself, and was at that moment chasing a small dog around the room. The little animal, which entered gaily into the sport, was worrying a dainty handkerchief in his teeth, and so engaged was he in this destructive purpose that he ran straight into my hands. I rescued the bedraggled piece of cambric and stood upright to find mademoiselle standing before me with mirth and a certain dignified self-possession in her eyes.

"THANK YOU, MONSIEUR," SHE SAID, TAKING THE HANDKERCHIEF
FROM MY HAND.

"THANK YOU, MONSIEUR," SHE SAID, TAKING THE HANDKERCHIEF FROM MY HAND.

"Thank you, Monsieur," she said, taking the handkerchief from my hand. It was evident that she did not recognise me as the stranger who had accosted her father on the previous day.

I explained my business in as few words as possible.

"The servant," I added, "made a mistake in bringing me to this room. I did not mean to trouble Mademoiselle; my business is with M. de Clericy. I am applying for the post of secretary."

She looked at me with a quick surprise, and her eyes lighted on my clothes with some significance, which made me think that perhaps Monsieur de Clericy gave less even than two hundred pounds a year to his amanuensis.

"Ah!" she said, with her thought apparent in her candid eyes. "My father is at present in his study—engaged, I believe, with Monsieur Misté."

"Misté?" I echoed, for the name was no less peculiar than her way of pronouncing it. She seemed to look for some sign that I knew this man.

"Yes—your predecessor."

"Ah! a secretary—a man-machine that writes."

She shook her head with a happy laugh, sinking, as it were, into an air of interest, which gave a sharp feeling that I had perhaps been forestalled in other matters by the man called Misté. She looked at me with such candid eyes, however, that the thought seemed almost a sacrilege, offered gratuitously to innocence and trustfulness. Her face was, indeed, a guarantee that if her maiden

fancy had been touched, her heart was at all events free from that deeper feeling which assuredly leaves its mark upon all who suffer it.

The name of Monsieur de Clericy's former secretary in some way grated on my hearing, so that instead of retiring from the presence of mademoiselle as my manners bade me do, I lingered, seeking opportunity to continue the conversation.

"I do not wish to intrude on Monsieur de Clericy," I said. "It is perhaps inexpedient that the new machine should be seen of the old."

Mademoiselle laughed, and again I caught the deep silver note of sympathy in her voice that was so new and yet familiar. In laughter the soul surely speaks.

"The word scarcely describes Monsieur Miste," retorted she.

"Does any single word describe him?"

For a moment she reflected. She was without self-consciousness, and spoke with me, a stranger, as easily as she talked to her father.

"A single word?" she echoed. "Yes—a chimera."

At this moment the sound of voices in the corridor made further delay impossible.

"Perhaps Mademoiselle will allow me to ring for the servant to conduct me to Monsieur de Clericy's study," I said.

"I will show you the room," replied she; "its door is never closed to me. I hear voices, which probably betoken the departure of Monsieur Miste."

The sound, indeed, came distinctly enough to our ears, but it was of one voice only, the benevolent tones of the Vicomte de Clericy, followed by his pleasant laugh. If Miste made reply, the words must have been uttered softly, for I heard them not. I opened the door, and mademoiselle led the way.

A man was descending the broad staircase which I had lately mounted—a slim man, who stepped gently. He did not turn, but continued his way, disappearing in the gloom of the large entrance hall. I gathered a quick impression of liteness and a noiseless footfall, of a sleek, black head, and something stirring within me, which was stronger than curiosity. I wondered why he was quitting the Vicomte's service. Such was my first sight of Charles Miste, and my first knowledge of his

existence.

The Vicomte had returned to his room, closing the door behind him, upon which mademoiselle now tapped lightly.

"Father," I heard her say as she entered, "a gentleman wishes to see you."

As I passed her, I caught the scent of some violets she wore in her dress, and the spring-like freshness of the odour seemed a part of herself.

The Vicomte received me so graciously that he and not I might have been the applicant for a situation. Bowing, he peered at me with short-sighted eyes.

"The English gentleman of yesterday," he said, indicating a chair.

"I took you at your word, Monsieur," I replied, "and now apply for the post of secretary."

Taking the chair he placed at my disposal, I awaited his further pleasure. He had seated himself at the writing-table, and was fingering a pen with thoughtfulness or perhaps hesitation. The table, I noticed, was bare of the litter which usually cumpers the desk of a busy man. The calendar lying at his elbow was an ornamental cardboard trifle, embellished with cupids and simpering shepherdesses—such as girls send to each other at the New Year. The surroundings, in fact, were indicative rather of a trifling leisure than of important affairs. The study and writing-table seemed to me to suggest a pleasant fiction of labours, to which the Vicomte retired when he desired solitude and a cigarette. I wondered what my duties might be.

After a pause, the old gentleman raised his eyes—the kindest eyes in the world—to my face, and I perceived beneath his white lashes a great benevolence, in company with a twinkling sense of humour.

"Does Monsieur know anything of the politics of this unfortunate country?" he asked, and he leant forward, his elbows on the bare writing-table, his attitude suggesting the kind encouragement which a great doctor will vouchsafe to a timid patient. The old Frenchman's manner, indeed, aroused in me that which I must be allowed to call my conscience—a cumbrous machine, I admit, hard to set going and soon running down. The sport of this adventure, entered into in a spirit of devilry, seemed suddenly to have shrunk to the dimensions of a somewhat sorry jest. It was, I now reflected, but a poor game to deceive an innocent girl and an old man as guileless. Innocence is a great safeguard.

"Monsieur," I answered, on the spur of the moment, "I have no such qualities as you naturally seek in a secretary. I received my education at Eton and at Cambridge University. If you want a secretary to bowl you a straight ball, or pull a fairly strong oar, I am your man, for I learnt little else. I possess, indeed, the ordinary education of an English gentleman, sufficient Latin to misread an epitaph or a motto, and too little Greek to do me any harm. I have, however, a knowledge of French, which I acquired at Geneva, whither my father sent me when I—er—was sent down from Cambridge. I have again quarrelled with my father. It is an annual affair. We usually quarrel when the hunting ends. This time it is serious. I have henceforth to make my way in the world. I am, Monsieur, what you would call a bad subject."

The tolerance with which my abrupt confession was received only made me the more self-reproachful. The worst of beginning to tell the truth is that it is so hard to stop. I could not inform him that I had fallen in love with a tone in his daughter's voice, with a light in her eyes—I, who had never made serious love to any woman yet. He would only think me mad.

There were in truth many matters with which I ought to have made the Vicomte acquainted. My quarrel with my father, for instance, had originated in my refusal to marry Isabella Gayerson—a young lady with landed estates and a fortune of eighty thousand pounds. I merely informed Monsieur, I confess, that my father and I had fallen out over money matters. Cannot most marriages arranged by loving parents be so described? To my recitation the old gentleman listened with much patience, and when I had partially eased my soul he merely nodded, saying:

"My question is not yet answered, mon ami. Do you know aught of French politics?"

"Absolutely nothing," was my answer, made in all honesty. And I thought I was speaking my own dismissal.

Monsieur de Clericy leant back in his chair with a shrug of the shoulders.

"Well," he muttered, half to himself, "perhaps it is of little consequence. You understand, Monsieur," he continued in a louder tone, looking at me kindly, "I like you. I may say it without impertinence, because I am an old man and you are young. I liked you as soon as I saw you yesterday. The duties for which I require a secretary are light. It is chiefly to be near me when I want you. I have my little estates in the South, in the Bourbonnais, and near to Orleans. I require

some one to correspond with my agents, to travel perhaps to my lands when a question arises which the bailiffs cannot settle unaided."

Thus he spoke for some time, and my duties, as he detailed them, sounded astonishingly light. Indeed, he paused occasionally as if seeking to augment them by the addition of trivial household tasks.

"Madame, the Vicomtesse," he said, "will also be glad to avail herself of your services."

The existence of this lady was thus made known to me for the first time. I have wondered since why, in this conversation, we with one accord ignored the first question in such affairs—namely, the salary paid by Monsieur to his secretary.

"I should require you," he said finally, "to live in the Hôtel Clericy while we are in Paris."

Some years earlier, during a hunting expedition in Africa, I had stalked a lion all night and far into the following day. On finally obtaining a sight of my prey, I found him old, disease-stricken and half-blind. The feelings of that moment I have never forgotten. A sensation near akin to it—a sort of shame attaching to a pursuit unworthy of a sportsman—came to me again now, when I was told that I might live under the roof that sheltered Mademoiselle de Clericy.

"You hesitate," said the Vicomte. "I am afraid it is an essential. I must have you always at hand."



Chapter III

Madame

"En paroles ou en actions, être discret, c'est s'abstenir."

It is to be presumed that the reader knows the usual result of such a tussle with the conscience as that upon which I now entered. At various turning points in a chequered career I have met my conscience thus face to face, and am honest enough to confess that the victory has not always fallen to that ghostly monitor.

After favouring me with his ultimatum, the Vicomte looked at me expectantly. I thought of Mademoiselle de Clericy's presence in that old house. Who was I to turn my back on the good things that the gods gave me? I hate your timid man who looks behind him on an unknown road.

"As Monsieur wills," I said, and with a sigh, almost of relief I thought, my companion rose.

"We will seek the Vicomtesse," he said. "My wife will have pleasure in making your acquaintance. And to-morrow you shall have my answer."

"Ah!" thought I; "the Vicomtesse decides it."

And I followed Monsieur de Clericy towards the door.

"It is half-past eleven," he said, looking at his modest silver watch. "We shall find Madame in her boudoir."

This apartment, it appeared, was situated beyond the drawing-room, of which we now passed the door. Below us was the great square hall, dark and gloomy; for its windows had been heavily barred in the old stirring times, and but little light filtered through the ironwork. At the head of the stairs was a gallery completely surrounding the quadrangle, and from this gallery access was gained to all the dwelling rooms.

The Vicomte tapped at the door of Madame's room, and without waiting for an answer passed in. I, having purposely lingered, did not hear the few words spoken upon the threshold, and only advanced when bidden to do so by my

companion.

"MONSIEUR HOWARD NATURALLY WISHED TO BE PRESENTED TO
YOU."

"MONSIEUR HOWARD NATURALLY WISHED TO BE PRESENTED TO YOU."

An elderly lady stood by the window, having just risen from the broad seat thereof, which was littered with the trifles of a lady's work-basket. The Vicomtesse was obviously many years younger than her husband—a trim woman of fifty or thereabouts, with crinkled grey hair and the clear brown complexion of the Provençale. Beneath the grey hair there looked out at me the cleverest eyes I have ever seen in a human head. I bowed, made suddenly aware that I stood in the presence of an individuality, near an oasis—as it were—in the dreary desert of human commonplace. And strange to say, at the same moment my conscience laid itself down to sleep. Madame la Vicomtesse de Clericy was a woman capable of guarding those near and dear to her.

"Monsieur Howard," explained her husband, looking at me, with his white fingers nervously intertwined, "is desirous of filling the post left vacant by the departure of our friend Charles Miste. We have had a little talk on affairs. It is possible that we may come to a mutually satisfactory arrangement. Monsieur Howard naturally wished to be presented to you."

Madame bowed, her clear dark eyes resting almost musingly on my face. She waited for me to speak, whereas nine women out of ten would have broken silence.

"I have explained to Monsieur le Vicomte," I hastened to say, "that I have none of the requisite qualifications for the post, and that my female relatives—my aunts, in fact—looked upon me as a *mauvais sujet*."

She smiled, and her eyes sought the lace-work held in her busy fingers. Mademoiselle de Clericy had, I remembered, worn a piece of such dainty needlework at her throat on the previous morning. I learnt to look for that piece of ever-growing lace-work in later days. Madame was never without it, and worked quaint patterns, learnt in a convent on the pine-clad slopes of Var.

"Monsieur Howard," went on the Vicomte, "is a gentleman of position in his own country on the east coast of England. He has, however, had a difference—a difference with his father."

The eyes were raised to my face for a brief moment.

"In the matter of a marriage of convenience," I added, giving the plain truth on

the impulse of the moment, or under the influence, perhaps, of Madame de Clericy's glance. Then I recollected that this was a different story from that tale of a monetary difficulty which I had related to Madame's husband ten minutes earlier. I glanced at him to see whether he had noticed the discrepancy, but was instantly relieved of my anxiety, so completely was the old man absorbed in an affectionate and somewhat humble contemplation of his wife. It was easy to see how matters stood in the Clericy household, and I conceived a sudden feeling of relief that so delicate a flower as Mademoiselle de Clericy should have so capable a guardian in the person of her mother. Evil takes that shape in which it is first held up to our vision. Incompetent and careless mothers are in fact criminals. Mademoiselle de Clericy had one near to her who could at all events clothe necessary knowledge in a reassuring garment.

"A marriage of convenience," repeated Madame, speaking for the first time. "It is so easy to be mistaken in such matters, is it not?"

"As easy for the one as for the other, Madame," replied I. "And it was I, and not my father, who was most intimately concerned."

She looked at me with a little upward nod of the head and a slow, wise smile. One never knows whence some women gather their knowledge of the world.

"Monsieur knows Paris?" she asked.

"As an Englishman, Madame."

"Then you only know the worst," was her comment.

She did not ask me to be seated. It was, I suspected, the hour for déjeuner. For this household was evidently one to adhere to old-fashioned customs. There was something homelike about this pleasant lady. Her presence in a room gave to the atmosphere something refined and womanly, which was new to one who, like myself, had lived mostly among men. Indeed, my companions of former days—no saints, I admit—would have been surprised could they have seen me bowing and making *congés* to this elderly lady like a dancing master. Moreover, the post I sought was lapsing into a domestic situation, for which my antecedents eminently unfitted me, nor did I pretend to think otherwise. Had I reached the age of discretion? Is there indeed such an age? I have seen old men and women who make one doubt it. At thirty-one does a man begin to range himself? "Ah, well!" thought I, "*vogue la galère*." I had made a beginning, and in Norfolk they do not breed men who leave a quest half accomplished.

For a moment I waited, and Madame seemed to have nothing more to say. I had not at that time, nor indeed have I since, acquired that polish of the world which takes the form of a brilliant, and I suspect insincere, manner in society. I had no compliments ready. I therefore took my leave.

The Vicomte accompanied me to the top of the stairs, and there made sure that the servants were awaiting my departure in the hall.

"To-morrow morning," he said, with a friendly touch on my arm, "you shall have my answer."

With this news then I returned to my comfortable quarters in John Turner's *appartement* in the Avenue d'Antan. I found that great banker about to partake of luncheon, which was served to him at midday, after the fashion of the country of his adoption. During my walk across the river and through the gardens of the Tuileries—at that time at the height of their splendour—I had not reflected very deeply on the matter in hand. I had thought more of Mademoiselle de Clericy's bright eyes than aught else.

"Good morning," said my host, whom I had not seen before going out. "Where have you been?"

"To the Vicomte de Clericy's."

"The devil you have! Then you are not so stolid as you look."

And he laughed as he shook out his table napkin. His thought was only half with me, for he was looking at the menu.

"Arcachon oysters!" he added; "the best in the world! I hate your bloated natives. Give me a small oyster."

"Give me a dozen," I answered, helping myself from the dish at my elbow.

"And did the Vicomte kick you downstairs?" asked my host, as he compounded in the dip of his plate a wonderful mixture of vinegar and spices.

"No. He is going to consider my application, and will give me his answer to-morrow morning."

John Turner set down the vinegar bottle and looked across the table at me with an expression of wonder on his broad face.

"Well, I never! Did you see Madame? Clever woman, Madame. Gives excellent dinners."

"Yes; I was presented to her."

"Ah! A match for you, Mr. Dick. Did you notice her feet?"

"I noticed that they were well shod."

"Just so!" muttered John Turner, who was now engaged in gastronomic delights. "In France a clever woman is always *bien chaussée*. Her brains run to her toes. In England it is different. If a woman has a brain it undermines her morals or ruins her waist."

"Only the plain women," suggested I, who had passed several seasons in London not altogether in vain.

"A pretty woman is never clever—she is too wise," said John Turner, stolidly, and he sipped his chablis.

The mysterious sauce with which this great gastronome flavoured his oysters was now prepared, while I, it must be confessed, had consumed my portion, and John Turner relapsed into silence. I watched him as he ate delicately, slowly, with a queer refinement. Many are ready to talk of some crafts under the name of art, which must now, forsooth, be spelt with a capital letter—why, I know no more than the artists. John Turner had his Art, and now exercised it. I always noticed that during the earlier and more piquant courses of a meal he was cynical and apt to give speech on matters of human meanness and vanity not unknown to many who are silent about them. Later on, when the dishes became more succulent, so would his views of life sweeten and acquire a mellower flavour. His round face now began to beam more pleasantly at me across the well-served table, like a rich autumn moon rising over a fat land.

"Pity it is," he said, as he placed a lamb cutlet on my plate, "that you and your father cannot agree."

"Pity that the guv'nor is so unreasonable," I answered.

"I do not suppose there is any question of reason on either side," rejoined my companion, with a laugh. "But I think you might make a little more allowance. You must remember that we old fellows are not so wise and experienced as our youngers and betters. I know he is a hot-blooded old reprobate—that father of

yours. I thumped him at Eton for it half a century ago. And you're a worthy son to him, I make no doubt—you have his great chin. But you are all he has, Dick—don't forget that now and remember it too late. Have another cutlet?"

"Thanks."

"Gad! I'd give five hundred a year for your appetite and digestion. Think of that old man, my boy, down in Norfolk at this time of year, with nobody to swear at but the servants. Norfolk is just endurable in October, when game and 'longshore herrings are in. But now—with lamb getting muttoney—poor old chap!"

"Well," I answered, "he could not eat me if I was at home. But I'll go back in the autumn. I generally make it up before the First."

"What a beautiful thing is filial love," murmured my companion, with a stout sigh, as he turned his attention to the matter of importance on the plate before him; and indeed—with its handicap of fifty years—I think his appetite put my hearty craving for food to shame.

We talked of other things for a while—of matters connected with the gay town in which we found ourselves. We discussed the merits of the wine before us, and it was not until later in the course of the repast that John Turner again reverted to my affairs. If these portions of our talk alone are reported, the reader must kindly remember that they are at all events relevant to the subject, however unworthy, of this narrative.

"So," said my stout companion when the coffee was served, "you are tricking the father so that you may make love to the daughter?"

This view of the matter did not commend itself to my hearing. Indeed, the truth so often gives offence that it is no wonder so few deal in it. A quick answer was on my tongue, but fortunately remained there. I—who had never been too difficult in such matters—did not like something in my friend's voice that savoured of disrespect towards Mademoiselle de Clericy. In a younger man I might have been tempted to allow such a hint to develop into something stronger which would offer me the satisfaction of throwing the speaker down the stairs. But John Turner was not a man to quarrel with, even when one was in the wrong. So I kept silence and burnt my lips at my coffee cup.

"Well," he went on placidly, "Mademoiselle Lucille is a pretty girl."

"Lucille," I said. "Is that her name?"

He cocked his eye at me across the table.

"Yes—a pretty name, eh?"

"It is," I answered him, with steady eyes. "I never heard a prettier."



Chapter IV

Disqualified

"Rêver c'est le bonheur; attendre c'est la vie."

The Vicomte de Clericy's answer was favourable to my suit, and I duly received permission to install myself in the apartments lately vacated by Charles Miste—whoever he may have been.

"And what, sir, is to become of me?" inquired my servant, when I instructed him to pack my clothes and made known to him my movements in the immediate future. I had forgotten Loomer. A secretary could scarcely come into residence attended by a valet, rejoicing in the usual direct or indirect emoluments, and possessing that abnormal appetite which only belongs to the man servant living in the kitchen. I told him, therefore, that his future was entirely his own, and that while his final fate was unquestionable, the making of his earthly career remained, for the present, in his own hands. In fact, I gave him permission to commence at once his descent to that bourne whither, I feared, his footsteps would tend.

Mr. Loomer was good enough to evince signs of emotion, and from a somewhat confused speech, I gathered that he refused to go to Avernus until he could make the journey in my service and at my heels. Ultimately it was agreed, however, that he should seek a temporary situation—he was a man of many talents, and as handy in the stable as in a gentleman's dressing-room—and remain therein until I should require his services again. As it happened, I had sufficient ready cash to pay him his wages, with an additional sum to compensate for the brevity of his notice to quit a sorry service. He took the money without surprise. It is surely a sign of good breeding to receive one's due with no astonishment.

"Can't you keep me on, sir?" he pleaded a last time, when I had proved by a gift of a pair of hunting boots (which were too small for me) that we really were about to part.

"My good Loomer, I am going into service myself. I always said I could black a boot better than you."

As I left the room I heard the worthy domestic mutter something about "pretty work," and "a Howard of Hopton," and made no doubt that he regretted less the fall of my ancestral dignity than the loss to himself of a careless and easily robbed master. At all events I had been under the impression that I possessed a fuller store of linen than that which emerged from my travel-stained trunks when these were unpacked later in the day in the Rue des Palmiers.

As for that matter of ancestral dignity, it gave me no trouble. Such a possession comes, I think, to little harm while a man keeps it in his own hands, and only falls to pieces when it gets into the grasp of a bad woman. Have we not seen half a dozen, nay, a dozen, such débâcles in our own time? And I contend that the degenerate scion of a great house who goes to the wrong side of the footlights for his wife is a criminal, and deserves all that may befall him. I bade my friend, John Turner, farewell, he standing stoutly in his smoking-room after luncheon, and prophesying a discouraging and darksome future for one so headstrong.

"You're going to the devil," he said, "though you think you are running after an angel."

"I am going to earn my own livelihood," answered I, with a laugh, lighting the last excellent cigar I was to have from his box for some time, "and make my idle ancestors turn in their graves. I am going to draw emoluments of not less than one hundred and fifty pounds per annum."

I drove across the river with my simple baggage, and was in due course installed in my apartments. With these there was no fault to find—indeed, they were worthy of a better inmate. A large and airy bedroom looking out over the garden where the foliage, as I have said, had none of the mournful sables worn by the trees in London. The room was beautifully furnished. Even one who knew more of saddles than of Buhl and Empire could see that at a glance. Moreover, I noted that every ornament or handle of brass shone like gold.

"Madame's eyes have been here," thought I; "the clever eyes."

Adjacent to the bedroom was the study, which the Vicomte had pointed out as being assigned to his secretary—adjoining as it did the room whither he himself retired at times—not, as I suspected, to engage in any great labours there.

While I was in my bedroom, the smart young Paris servant came in, looked carelessly at my trunks, and was for withdrawing, when I stopped him.

"Is it the buckles you are afraid of?" I said. "Beware rather of the strap."

Therewith I threw my keys on the table before him and went into my study. When I revisited my room later I found everything neatly placed within the drawers and the empty trunks removed.

There were upon my study table a number of books and papers, placed there with such evident intention that I took cognizance of them, judging them to be the accounts rendered by the Vicomte's various estates. So far as a cursory examination could prove it, I judged that we had to deal with but clumsy scoundrels, and in France in those days scoundrels were of fine fleur, I can tell you, while every sort of villainy flourished there.

I was engaged with these books when the Vicomte entered, after knocking at the door. He referred to this courteous precaution by a little gesture indicating the panel upon which his knuckle had sounded.

"You see," he said, "this room is yours. Let us begin as we intend to go on."

If I was a queer secretary, here at all events was an uncommon master.

We fell to work at once, and one or two questions requiring immediate investigation came under discussion. I told him my opinion of his stewards; for I hated to see an old man so cheated. I lived, it will be remembered, in a glass house, and naturally was forever reaching my hand towards a stone. The Vicomte laughed in his kindly way at what he was pleased to term my high-handedness.

"Mon Dieu!" he cried; "what a grasp of steel. But they will be surprised—the bourgeois. I have always been so tolerant. I have ruled by kindness."

"He who rules by kindness is the slave of thieves," I answered, penning the letter we had decided to indite.

The Vicomte laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"Well," he said, "so long as we begin as we intend to go on."

Such in any case was the beginning, and this my introduction to the duties I had undertaken. They seemed simple enough, and especially so to one who was no novice at the administration of an estate. For my father, in his softer moments—when, in fact, he had been brought to recognize that my vices were at least

hereditary—had initiated me into the working of a great landed holding.

At seven o'clock we dined. Mademoiselle wore a white dress with a broad yellow ribbon round her girlish waist. Her sleeves—I suppose it was the fashion of the period—were wide and flowing, and her arms and hands were those of a child.

Madame de Clericy, I remember, did not talk much, saying little more, indeed, than such polite words as her position of hostess rendered necessary. The burden of the conversation rested chiefly with her aged husband, who sustained it simply and cheerily. His chief aim at this, and indeed at all times, seemed to be to establish an agreeable and mutual ease. I have seldom seen in a man, and especially in an old man, such consideration for the feelings of others.

Lucille's clear laugh was ever ready to welcome some little pleasantry, and she joined occasionally in the talk. I listened more to the voice than to the words. Her gay humour found something laughable in remarks that sounded grave enough, and I suddenly felt a hundred years old. As she walked demurely into the dining-room on her father's arm, I thought in truth that she would rather have skipped and run thither.

During dinner mention was made of the Baron Giraud, and I learnt that that financier was among the Vicomte's friends. The name was not new to me, although the Baron's personality was unknown.

The Baron was one of the mushrooms of that day—a nobleman of finance, a true product of Paris, highly respected and honoured there. John Turner knew him well, and was ponderously silent respecting him.

"But why," asked Lucille, when her father had delivered a little oration in favour of the rich man, "does Monsieur Giraud dye his hair?"

There was a little laugh and a silence at this display of naïve wisdom. Then it was Madame who spoke.

"No doubt he feels himself unworthy to wear it white," she said, rising from the table.

I was given to understand that the remainder of the evening was my own, and the Vicomte himself showed me the small staircase descending from the passage between my study and his own, and presented me with a key to the door at the foot of it. This door, he explained, opened to a small passage running between

the Rue des Palmiers and the Rue Courte. It would serve me for egress and entry at any time without reference to the servants or disturbance to the house.

"I would not give the key to the first comer," he added.

I learnt later that he and I alone had access to the door of which the servants had no key, nor ever passed there. The same evening I availed myself of my privilege and went to my club, where over a foolish game of chance I won a year's salary.

Such was the beginning of my career in the service of the Vicomte de Clericy. During the weeks that followed I found that there was, in fact, plenty for me to do were the estates to be properly worked—to be administered as we Englishmen are called upon to treat our property to-day, that is to say, like a sponge, to be squeezed to its last drop. I soon discovered that the Vicomte was in the hands of old-fashioned stewards, who, besides feathering their own nests, were not making the best of the land. My conscience, it must be admitted, was at work again—and I had thought it finally vanquished.

Here was I, admitted to the Hôtel Clericy—welcomed in the family circle, and trusted there in the immediate vicinity of and with daily access to as innocent and trusting a soul as ever stepped from a French convent. I—a wolf who had not hitherto even troubled to cover my shaggy sides with a fleece. What could I do? Lucille was so gay, so confiding, in a pretty girlish way which never altered as we came to know each other better. Madame was so placid and easy-going—in her stout black silk dress, with her lace-work. Monsieur de Clericy gave me his confidence so unreservedly—what could I do but lapse into virtue? And I venture to think that many a blacker sheep than myself would have blanched in the midst of so pure a flock.

One evening Madame asked me to join the family circle in the drawing-room. The room was very pretty and homelike—quite unlike our grim drawing-room at Hopton, where my father never willingly set foot since its rightful owner had passed elsewhere. There were flowers in abundance—their scent filled the air—from the Var estate in Provence, which had been Madame's home and formed part of the *dot* she brought into the diminishing Clericy coffers. Two lamps illuminated the room rather dimly, and a pair of candles stood on the piano.

"YOU ARE SAD," SAID LUCILLE, WITH A LITTLE LAUGH, "WITH
YOUR FACE IN YOUR HAND COMME ÇA."

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HAND COMME ÇA."

Monsieur de Clericy played a game at bezique with Madame, who chuckled a good deal at her own mistakes with the cards, and then asked Lucille for some music. The girl sat down at the piano, and there, to her own accompaniment, without the printed score, sang such songs of Provence as tug at the heart strings, one knows not why. There seemed to be a wail in the music—and in slurring, as it were, from one note to the other—a trick such Southern songs demand—I heard the tone I loved.

Madame listened while she worked. The Vicomte dropped gently to sleep. I sat with my elbow on my knee and looked at the carpet. And when the voice rose and fell, I knew that none other had the same message for me.

"You are sad," said Lucille, with a little laugh, "with your face in your hand, *comme ça*."

And she imitated my position and expression with a merry toss of the head. "Are you thinking of your sins?"

"Yes, Mademoiselle," answered I, truthfully enough.

Many evenings I passed thus in the peaceful family circle—and always Lucille sang those gaily sad little songs of Provence.

The weeks slipped by, and the outer world was busy with great doings, while we in the Rue des Palmiers seemed to stand aside and watch the events go past.

The Emperor—than whom no greater man lived at the middle of the present century—was losing health, and, with that best of human gifts, his grasp over his fellowmen. The dogs were beginning to collect—the dogs that are ever in readiness to fall on the stricken lion.

I marvelled to discover how little the Vicomte interested himself in politics. One other discovery only did I make respecting my patron; I found that he loved money.

My conscience, as I have said, was busy at this time, and the burden of my deception began to weigh upon my mind as if I had been a mere schoolboy, and no man of the world. I might, however, have borne the burden easily enough if chance had not favoured the right.

I was one morning writing in Monsieur de Clericy's study, when the door was impetuously thrown open and Lucille came running in. "Ah!" she said, stopping,

"only you."

"That is all, Mademoiselle."

She was turning to go when on an impulse of the moment I called to her.

"Mademoiselle!" She turned and slowly came back. With a little laugh she stood in front of me seated at the great table. She took up a quill pen, which I had laid aside a moment earlier, and played with it.

"What are you writing?" she asked, looking down at the papers before me—"your own history?"

As she spoke the pen escaped from her fingers and fell upon my papers, leaving ink stains there.

"There," she cried, with a laugh of mock despair, "I have spoilt your life."

"No; but you have altered its appearance," I answered. "Mademoiselle, I have something to say to you. When I came here I deceived your father. I told him that I was ruined—that my father had disowned me—that I was forced to earn my own livelihood. It was untrue—I shall one day be as rich as your father."

"Then why did you come here?" asked the girl, for a moment grave.

"To be near you."

And she broke into a laugh, shaking her head.

"I saw you in the crowd at the Fête Napoleon—I heard your voice. There is no one in the world like you. I fell in love, Mademoiselle."

Still she laughed, as if I were telling her an amusing story.

"And it is useless," I pursued, somewhat bitterly, perhaps. "I am too old?"

There was a little mirror on the mantelpiece. She ran and fetched it and held it in front of my face.

"Look," she cried merrily. "Yes, hundreds of years!"

With a laugh and flying skirts she ran from the room.



Chapter V

C'est la Vie

"Les querelles ne dureraient pas longtemps si le tort n'était d'un côté."

Monsieur Alphonse Giraud, unlike many men, had an aim in life—a daily purpose with which he rose in the morning at, it must be admitted, a shockingly late hour—without which he rarely sought his couch even when it was not reached until the foolish birds were astir.

The son of the celebrated Baron Giraud sought, in a word, to be mistaken for an Englishman—and what higher ambition could we, who modestly set such store upon our nationality, desire him to cherish?

In view of this praiseworthy object, Alphonse Giraud wore a mustache only, and this—oh! inconsistency of great minds—he laboriously twirled heavenwards in the French fashion. It was, in fact, the guileless Alphonse's chief tribulation that, however industriously he cultivated that devil-may-care upward sweep, the sparse ornament to his upper lip invariably drooped downwards again before long. In the sunny land of France it is held that the mustache worn "en croc" not only confers upon its possessor an air of distinction, but renders that happy individual particularly irresistible in the eyes of the fair. Readers of modern French fiction are aware that the heroes of those edifying tales invariably wear the mustache "hardiment retroussée," which habit doubtless adds a subtle charm to their singularly puerile and fatuous conversation imperceptible to the mere reader.

Alphonse Giraud was a small man, and would have given a thousand pounds for another inch, as he frankly told his friends. His outward garments were fashioned in London, whence also came his hats, gloves and boots. But within all these he was hopelessly and absolutely French. The English boots trod the pavement—they knew no other path in life—in a manner essentially Gallic. The check trousers, of a pattern somewhat loud and startling, had the mincing gait in them of any "pantalon de fantasia," purchased à prix fixe in the Boulevard St. Germain, across the water. It is useless to lift a Lincoln and Bennett from a little

flat-topped head, cut, as they say, to the rat and fringed all over with black, upright hair.

But young Giraud held manfully to his purpose, and even essayed to copy the attitudes of his own groom, a thin-legged man from Streatham, who knew a thing or two, let him tell you, about a 'oss. There was no harm in Alphonse. There is, indeed, less harm in Frenchmen than they—sad dogs!—would have you believe. They are, as a rule, domesticated individuals, with a pretty turn for mixing a salad. Within the narrow but gay waistcoat of this son of Paris there beat as kind a little eager French heart as one may wish to deal with.

"Bon Dieu!" Alphonse would exclaim, when convinced that he had been robbed or cheated. "What will you? I am like that. I daresay the poor devil wanted the money badly—and I do not miss it."

There is a charity that gives, and another that allows the needy to take.

It was the Baron Giraud's great desire that Alphonse should be a gentleman of the great world, moving in his narrow orbit in the first circles of Parisian society, which was nothing to boast of in those days, and has steadily declined ever since. To attain such an eminence, the astute financier knew as well as any that only one thing was really necessary—namely, money. This he gave to his son with an open hand, and only gasped when he heard whither it went and how freely Alphonse spent it.

"There is plenty more," he said, "behind." And his little porcine eyes twinkled amid their yellow wrinkles. "I am a man of substance. You must be a man of position. But do not lend to the wrong people. Rather give to the right and be done with it. They will take it—bon Dieu! You need not shake your head. There is no man who will refuse money if you offer him enough."

And who shall say that the Baron Giraud was wrong?

A young man possessing a light heart and a heavy purse will never want a friend in this kind world of ours. And Alphonse Giraud possessed, moreover, a few of the better sort of friends, who had well-filled purses of their own, and wanted nothing from him but his gay laugh and good-fellowship. These were true friends, who did not scruple to tell him, when they encountered him in the Bois de Boulogne, afoot or on horseback, that while the right-hand side of his mustache was most successfully en croc, the other extremity of the ornament pointed earthwards. And, let it be remembered, that to tell a man of a defect in

his personal appearance is always a doubtful kindness.

"Ah, heavens!" Alphonse would exclaim to these true comrades, "I have evil luck, and two minutes ago I bowed to the beautiful Comtesse de Peudechose in her buggy."

Alphonse affected the society of Englishmen, was a member of the clubs frequented by the sons of Albion resident in Paris, and sought the society of the young gentlemen of the Embassy. It was in the apartments of one of these that he made the acquaintance of Phillip Gayerson, a young fellow intended for the diplomatic service. Phillip Gayerson, be it known at once, was the brother of that Isabella Gayerson to whose hand, heart and estate the present chronicler was accredited by a fond father, and about whom, indeed, he had quarrelled with the author of his being.

The name of Dick Howard being at that time unknown to the little Frenchman, Alphonse Giraud made no mention of it to Gayerson a self-absorbed man, who had probably forgotten my existence at this time.

My countryman, as I afterwards learned, had come to Paris with the object of learning the language, which by reason of its subtlety lends itself most readily to diplomatic purposes, the most expressive language, to my thinking, that the world has yet evolved, not excepting the much-vaunted tongue in which Homer wrote. Phillip and I had been boys together, and of all the comrades of my youth I should have selected him the last to distinguish himself in statecraft. He was a quiet, unobservant, and, as previously noted, self-absorbed man, with a sense of the picturesque, which took the form of mediocre water-colour sketching. His appearance was in his favour, for he was visibly a gentleman; a man, moreover, of refined thought and habit, whom burly Norfolk squires dubbed effeminate.

Alphonse Giraud liked him—the world is sunny to those who look at it through sunny eyes—and took him up, as the saying goes, without hesitation. He procured for him an invitation to a semi-state ball, held, as some no doubt remember, in the autumn of 1869. It was Lucille de Clericy's first ball, and Giraud renewed there a childish friendship with one whose hair he confessed to have pulled in the unchivalrous days of his infancy.

Alphonse, who was of a frank nature, as are many of his countrymen, told Madame de Clericy, whom he escorted to the refreshment room after dancing with her daughter, that he loved Lucille.

"But my dear Alphonse," retorted that lady, "you had forgotten her existence until this evening."

This objection to his passion the lightsome Alphonse waived aside with a perfectly gloved little hand.

"But," he answered earnestly, "unknown to myself her vision must always have been *here*."

And he touched his shirt-front with the tips of his fingers gently, remembering the delicacy of his linen.

"It is an angel!" he added, with an upward glance of his bright little eyes, and tossed off a glass of champagne cup.

Madame de Clericy sipped her coffee slowly, and said nothing; but her eyes travelled downward from the crown of her companion's head to his dapper feet. And during that scrutiny there is little doubt that she reckoned the value of Monsieur Alphonse Giraud. What she saw was a pleasant spoken young man, plus twenty thousand pounds a year. No wonder the Vicomtesse smiled softly.

"And I," went on the Frenchman in half humorous humility, "what am I? Not clever, not handsome, not even tall!"

The lady shrugged her shoulders.

"*C'est la vie*," she said; a favourite reflection with her.

"Yes, and life and I are equal," replied Alphonse, with his gay laugh. "We are both short! And now I wish to present to you and to Lucille my best friend, Phillip Gayerson. He stands over there by the table, he in English clothes. He only arrived in Paris ten days ago, and speaks French indifferently. But he is charming, quite charming, my dearest friend."

"Did you know him before he came to Paris?"

"Oh, no! Excuse me. I will bring him."

Madame made no remark, but watched Giraud with her quiet smile as he went to seek this dear friend of eight days' standing.

Phillip Gayerson was distinguished by a slight shyness. It was as little known or understood in Paris in the decadent days of the Second Empire as it is now in the

time of our own social collapse in England.

Thus, when the introduction was complete, Phillip Gayerson found that he had nothing to say to this elderly French lady, and was glad when Lucille came up, radiant on the arm of her partner. Alphonse presented his friend at once, and here Phillip felt more at his ease, being a better dancer than talker, and asked for the honour of a waltz without delay.

"I have but two left," answered Mademoiselle de Clericy, with a gay glance of happiness towards her mother. "They are at the end of the programme, and I promised to reserve them for Monsieur Howard."

She handed him her engagement card, in frank confirmation of this statement.

"R. H.," said Gayerson, deciphering the initials Lucille herself had scribbled. "If this is Dick Howard I will take the first of his two dances, and risk the consequence. It will not be the first time that Dick and I have fallen out."

"THEN YOU KNOW MR. HOWARD?" SAID LUCILLE, WITH ANOTHER GLANCE AT HER MOTHER. "YES," ... ANSWERED GAYERSON, BUT HAD NO TIME FOR MORE, FOR THE NEXT DANCE WAS GIRAUD'S, WHO WAS ALREADY BOWING BEFORE HER, AS BEFORE A DEITY. "THEN YOU KNOW MR. HOWARD?" SAID LUCILLE, WITH ANOTHER GLANCE AT HER MOTHER. "YES," ... ANSWERED GAYERSON, BUT HAD NO TIME FOR MORE, FOR THE NEXT DANCE WAS GIRAUD'S, WHO WAS ALREADY BOWING BEFORE HER, AS BEFORE A DEITY.

He wrote his name over mine, and returned the card to its owner.

"Then you know Mr. Howard?" said Lucille, with another glance at her mother.

"Yes," ... answered Gayerson, but had no time for more, for the next dance was Giraud's, who was already bowing before her, as before a deity.

Madame de Clericy made a little movement, as if to speak to Gayerson, but that young gentleman failed to see the gesture, and moved away to find his partner for the coming waltz.

With the great people gathered at this assembly we have nothing to do, though the writer and the reader, no doubt, love to rub elbows with such lofty persons, if it be only in a public room. Many of them, be it noted, were not nearly so important as they considered themselves, and the greatness of some was built upon a base too frail to withstand the storm and stress of the coming years.

Through the brilliant throng Lucille moved gaily and happily, taking, with the faith of youth, dress for gold, and a high head for the token of a noble heart. When Phillip Gayerson claimed his dance he found her a little tired, but still dazzled and excited by the brilliance of the occasion.

"Is it not splendid?" she exclaimed, taking his arm. "It is my first ball. I am sure I shall never be too old to dance, as mother says she is. Is it not absurd to say such a thing?"

Gayerson laughed, and as was his wont—a habit, indeed, with many shy men—came straight to the point.

"Do you know Dick Howard, then?" he asked.

"Yes, a little. Has he arrived? This is his dance, you know."

"I cannot tell you if he has arrived, Mademoiselle," answered the Englishman, in his halting French. "I know him at home—in Norfolk. I was not aware that he was in Paris. But he will not be here to-night."

"Why?"

"Because his father is dead."

Lucille said nothing. She obeyed the movements of his arm, and they danced, mingling with that gay throng, where the feet were lighter than the hearts, we may be sure. They went through the whole dance in silence, as Phillip afterwards told me—and he tried in vain to engage Lucille's full attention to matters of passing interest.

"We must find my mother," she said at length, when the music had ceased. "Mr. Howard does not know. He has been travelling in the South with my father. His letters have not been forwarded to him."

Phillip Gayerson guided his partner through the laughing throng.

"It will be bad news for Dick," he said, "for his father has left him penniless."

"I understood," observed Lucille, looking attentively at her bouquet, "that he was wealthy."

"No. He quarrelled with his father, who left him without a sou. But Howard knew it before he quitted England."

Lucille did not speak again until they had joined her mother, to whom she said something so hurriedly that Gayerson did not catch the import of her words.

At this moment I entered the room, and made my way towards them, feeling more fit for my bed than a ball-room, for I had travelled night and day to dance a waltz with Lucille. As I approached, Gayerson bowed to the ladies and took his departure.

"My dance, Mademoiselle," I said, "if you have been so kind as to remember it."

"Yes," answered Lucille, coldly as it seemed, "but I am tired, and we are going home."

I looked towards Madame, and saw something in her face, I knew not what.

"Your arm, mon ami," she said, lifting her hand; "we had better go home."



Chapter VI

A Glimpse of Home

"Pour rendre la société commode il faut que chacun conserve sa liberté."

Those who have rattled over the cobble stones of old Paris will understand that we had no opportunity of conversation during our drive from the Tuileries to the Rue des Palmiers. Lucille, with her white lace scarf half concealing her face, sat back in her corner with closed eyes and seemed to be asleep. As we passed the street lamps their light flashing across Madame's face showed her to be alert, attentive and sleepless. On crossing the Pont Napoleon I saw that the sky behind the towers of Notre Dame was already of a pearly grey. The dawn was indeed at hand, and the great city, wrapped in a brief and fitful slumber, would soon be rousing itself to another day of gaiety and tears, of work and play, of life and death.

The Rue des Palmiers was yet still. A sleepy servant opened the door, and we crept quietly upstairs, lest we should disturb the Vicomte, who, tired from his great journey, had retired to bed while I changed my clothes for the Imperial ball.

"Good-night," said Lucille, without looking round at the head of the stairs. Madame followed her daughter, but I noticed that she gave me no salutation.

I turned to my study, of which the door stood open, and where a shaded lamp discreetly burned. I threw aside my coat and attended to the light. My letters lay on the table, but before I had taken them up the rustle of a woman's dress in a gallery drew my attention elsewhere.

It was Madame, who came in bearing a small tray, whereon stood wine and biscuits.

"You are tired out," she said. "You had no refreshment at the Tuileries. You must drink this glass of wine."

"Thank you, Madame," I answered, and turned to my letters, among which were a couple of telegrams. But she laid her quiet hand upon them and pointed with the other to the glass that she had filled. She watched me drink the strong wine, which was, indeed, almost a cordial, then took up the letters in her hands.

"My poor friend," she said, "there is bad news for you here. You must be prepared."

Handing me the letters, she went to the door, but did not quit the room. She merely stood there with her back turned to me, exhibiting a strange, silent patience while I slowly opened the letters and read that my father and I had quarrelled for the last time.

It was I who moved first and broke the silence of that old house. The daylight was glimmering through the closed jalousies, making stripes of light upon the ceiling.

"Madame," I said, "I must go home—to England—by the early train, this morning! May I ask you to explain to Monsieur le Vicomte."

"Yes," she answered, turning and facing me. "Your coffee will be ready at seven o'clock. And none of us will come downstairs until after your departure. At such times a man is better alone—is it not so? For a woman it is different."

I extinguished the useless lamp, and we passed round the gallery together. At the door of my bedroom she stopped, and turning, laid her hand—as light as a child's—upon my arm.

"What will you, my poor friend?" she said, with a queer little smile. "*C'est la vie.*"

It is not my intention to dwell at length upon my journey to England and all that awaited me there. There are times in his life when—as Madame de Clericy said, with her wise smile—a man is better alone. And are there not occasions when the most eloquent of us is best dumb?

I had for travelling companion on the bright autumn morning when I quitted Paris my father's friend, John Turner—called suddenly to England on matters of business. He gave a grunt when he saw me in the Northern station.

"Better have taken my advice," he said, "to go home and make it up with your father, rather than stay here to run after that girl with the pretty hair—at your time of life. Avoid quarrels and seek a reconciliation—that is my plan. Best way is to ask the other chap to dinner and do him well. What are you going home for now? It is too late."

As, indeed, I knew without the telling. For when I reached Hopton my father had already been laid in the old churchyard beneath the shadow of the crumbling walls of the ruined church, which is now no longer used. They have built a gaudy new edifice farther inland, but so long as a Howard owns Hopton Hall, we

shall, I think, continue to lie in the graveyard nearer to the sea.

I suppose we are a quarrelsome race, for I fell foul of several persons almost as soon as I arrived. The lawyers vowed that there were difficulties—but none, I protest, but what such parchment minds as theirs would pause to heed. One thing, however, was certain. Did I not read it in black and white myself? My obstinate old father—and, by gad! I respect him for it—had held to his purpose. He had left me penniless unless I consented to marry Isabella Gayerson. The estate was bequeathed in trust, to be administered by said trustees during my lifetime, unless I acceded to a certain matrimonial arrangement entertained for me. Those were the exact words. So Isabella had no cause to blush when the will was published abroad. And we may be sure that the whole county knew it soon enough, and vowed that they had always thought so.

"If one may inquire the nature of the matrimonial arrangement so vaguely specified?"... said the respectable Norwich solicitor who, like all his kind, had a better coat than his client, for those who live on the vanity and greed of their neighbours live well.

"One may," I replied, "and one may go to the devil and ask him."

The lawyer gave a dry laugh as he turned over his papers, and I make no doubt charged some one for his wounded feelings.

So the secret was kept between me and the newly raised stone in Hopton churchyard. And I felt somehow that there was a link between us in the fact that my father had kept the matter of our quarrel from the mouths of gossips and tattlers, leaving it to my honour to obey or disobey him, and abide by the result.

I am not one of those who think it right to remember their dead as saints who lived a blameless life, and passed away from a world that was not good enough for them. Is it not wiser to remember them as they were, men and women like ourselves, with faults in number, and a half-developed virtue or two, possessing something beyond copybook good or evil, which won our love in life, and will keep their memory green after death? I did not fall into the error of thinking that death had hallowed wishes which I had opposed in life; and while standing by my father's grave, where he lay, after long years, by the side of the fair girl whom I had called mother, I respected him for having died without changing his opinion, while recognising no call to alter mine.

The hall, it appeared, was to be held at my disposal to live in whenever I so

wished, but I was forbidden to let it. A young solicitor of Yarmouth, working up, as they say, a practice, wrote to me in confidence, saying that the will was an iniquitous one, and presuming that I intended to contest its legality. He further informed me that such work was, singularly enough, a branch of the profession of which he had made a special study. I replied that persons who presumed rendered themselves liable to kicks, and heard no more from Yarmouth.

The neighbours were kind enough to offer me advice or hospitality, according to their nature, neither of which I felt inclined, at that time, to accept, but made some small return for their good will by inviting them to extend their shooting over the Hopton preserves, knowing that my poor old sire would turn in his grave were the birds allowed to go free.

Among others I received a letter from Isabella Gayerson, conveying the sympathy of her aged father and mother in my bereavement.

"As for myself," she wrote, "you know, Dick, that no one feels more keenly for you at this time, and wishes more sincerely that she could put her sympathy to some practical use. The hall must necessarily be but a sad and lonely dwelling for you now, and we want you to recollect that Fairacre is now, as at all times, a second home, where an affectionate welcome awaits you."

So wrote the subject of our quarrel, and in a like friendly tone I made reply. Whether Isabella was aware of the part she had played in my affairs, wiser heads must decide for themselves. If such was the case, she made no sign, and wrote at intervals letters of a spirit similar to that displayed in the paragraph above transcribed. On such affairs, men are but poor prophets in the strange country of a woman's mind. A small experience of the sex leads me, however, to suggest that, as a rule, women—ay, and schoolgirls—have a greater knowledge of such matters of the heart than they are credited with—that, indeed, women usually err on the side of knowing too much—knowing, in a word, facts that do not exist.

So disgusted was I with the whole business that I turned my back on the land of my birth and left the lawyers to fight over their details. I appointed a London solicitor to watch my interests, who smiled at my account of the affair, saying that things would be better settled among members of the legal profession—that my ways were not theirs. For which compliment I fervently thanked him, and shook the dust of London from off my feet.

The Vicomte de Clericy had notified to me by letter that my post would be held vacant and at my disposal for an indefinite period, but that at the same time my

presence would be an infinite relief to him. This was no doubt the old gentleman's courteous way of putting it, for I had done little enough to make my absence of any note.

Travelling all night, I arrived in the Rue des Palmiers at nine o'clock one morning, and took coffee as usual in my study. At ten o'clock Monsieur de Clericy came to me there, and was kind enough to express both sympathy at my bereavement and pleasure at my return. In reply I thanked him.

"But," I added, "I regret that I must resign my post."

"Resign," cried the old gentleman. "Mon Dieu! do not talk of it. Why do you think of such a thing?"

"I am no secretary. I have never had the taste for such work nor a chance of learning to do it."

The Vicomte looked at me thoughtfully.

"But you are what I want," he replied. "A man—a responsible man, and not a machine."

"Bah," said I, shrugging my shoulders, "what are we doing—work that any could do. What am I wanted for? I have done nothing but write a few letters and frighten a handful of farmers in Provence."

The Vicomte de Clericy coughed confidentially.

"My dear Howard," he answered, looking at the door to make sure that it was closed. "I am getting an old man. I am only fit to manage my affairs while all is tranquil and in order. Tell me—as man to man—will things remain tranquil and in order? You know as well as I do that the Emperor has a malady from which there is no recovery. And the Empress, ah! yes—she is a clever woman. She has spirit. It is not every woman who would take this journey to Egypt to open the Suez Canal and make that great enterprise a French undertaking. But has a woman ever governed France successfully—from the boudoir or the throne? Look back into history, my dear Howard, and tell me what the end of a woman's government has always been."

It was the first time that my old patron had named politics in my hearing, or acknowledged their bearing upon the condition of private persons in France. His father had been of the emigration. He himself had been born in exile. The family

prestige was but a ghost of its former self—and I had hitherto treated the subject as a sore one and beyond my province.

The Vicomte had sat down at my table. As for me, I was already on the broad window seat, looking down into the garden. Lucille was there upbraiding a gardener. I could see the nature of their conversation from the girl's face. She was probably wanting something out of season. Women often do. The man was deprecatory, and pointed contemptuously towards the heavens with a rake. There was a long silence in the room which was called my study.

"I think, mon ami," said my companion at length, "that there is another reason."

"Yes," answered I, bluntly, "there is."

I did not look round, but continued to watch Lucille in the garden. The Vicomte sat in silence—waiting, no doubt, for a further explanation. Failing to get this, he said, rather testily as I thought:

"Is the reason in the garden, my friend, that your eyes are fixed there?"

"Yes, it is. It is scolding the gardener. And I think I am better away from the Hôtel Clericy, Monsieur le Vicomte."

The old man slowly rose and came to the window, standing behind me.

"Oh—la, la!" he muttered in his quaint way—an exclamation uncomplimentary to myself; for our neighbours across channel reserve the syllables exclusively for their disasters.

We looked down at Lucille, standing amid the chrysanthemums, lending to their pink and white bloom a face as fresh as any of the flowers.

"But it is a child, mon ami," said the Vicomte, with his tolerant smile.

"Yes—I ought to know better, I admit," answered I, rising and attending to the papers on the writing table, and I laughed without feeling very merry. I sat down and began mechanically to work. At all events, my conscience had won this time—and if the Vicomte pressed me to stay, he did so with full knowledge of the danger.

The window was open. The Evil One prompted Lucille at that moment to break into one of those foolish little songs of Provence, and the ink dried on my pen.

STANDING AMID THE CHRYSANTHEMUMS, LENDING TO THEIR PINK
AND WHITE BLOOM A FACE AS FRESH AS ANY OF THE FLOWERS.
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BLOOM A FACE AS FRESH AS ANY OF THE FLOWERS.

The Vicomte broke the silence that followed.

"The ladies are going away for the winter months," he said. "They are going to Draguignan, in Var. At all events, stay with me until they return."

"I cannot think why you ever took me."

"An old man's fancy, mon cher. You will not forsake me."

"No."

Chapter VII

In Provence

"Autant d'amoureux, autant d'amours; chacun aime comme il est."

The chateau of La Pauline stands at the head of the valley of the Nartubie in the department of Var, and looks down upon Draguignan, the capital of that division of France. La Pauline, and its surrounding lands formed the *dot* of the Vicomtesse de Clericy, and the products of its rich terraces were of no small account in the family revenues.

It was to this spot that Lucille and her mother repaired in the month of December. Not far away the Baron Giraud had his estate—the modern castle of "Mon Plaisir," with its little white turret, its porcelain bas-reliefs in brilliant colours let into the walls, its artificial gardens ornamented with gold and silver balls, and summer-houses of which the windows were glazed with playful fancy that outdid nature in clothing the prospect in the respective hues of spring, summer, autumn and winter.

Very different from this was the ancient chateau of La Pauline, perched half-way up the mountain on a table-land—its grey stone face showing grimly against a sombre background of cypress trees. The house was built, as the antiquarians of Draguignan avow, of stone that was hewn by the Romans for less peaceful purposes. That an ancient building must have stood here would, indeed, be to some extent credible, from the fact that in front of the house lies a lawn of that weedless turf which is only found in this country in such places as the Arena at Fréjus. In the center of the lawn stands a sun dial—grey, green and ancient—a relic of those days when men lived by hours, and not by minutes, as we do to-day. It is all of the old world—of that old, old world of France beside which our British antiquities are, with a few exceptions, youthful. This was the birthplace of Madame de Clericy and of Lucille herself. Hither the ladies always returned with a quiet joy. There is no more peaceful spot on earth than La Pauline, chiefly, perhaps, because there is nothing in nature so still and lifeless as an olive grove. Why, by the way, do the birds of the air never build their nests in these trees—why do they rarely rest and never ring there? Behind La Pauline—so close, indeed, that the little chapel stands in the grey hush of the trees, guarded,

of course, by a sentinel circle of cypresses—rise the olive terraces and stretch up, tier above tier, till the pines are reached. Below the grey house the valley opens out like a fan, and far away to the south the rugged crags of Roquebrune stand out against a faint blue haze, which is the Mediterranean.

No better example of Peace on Earth is to be found than La Pauline after sunset, at which time the olive groves are a silver fairyland—when the chapel bell tinkles in vain for the faithful to come to vespers—when the stout old placid curé sits down philosophically in the porch to read the office to himself, knowing well that a hot day in the vineyards turns all footsteps homewards.

When the ladies are in residence at the chateau, it is a different matter. Then, indeed, the curé lays aside his old soutane and dons that fine new clerical habit presented to him by Mademoiselle Lucille at the time of her first communion, when the Bishop of Fréjus came to Draguignan, and the whole valley assembled to do him honour there.

The ladies came, as we have said, in December, and at the gate the curé met them as usual—making there, as was his custom, a great hesitation as to kissing Lucille, now that she was a demoiselle of the great world, having—the rogue!—shaved with extraordinary care for that very purpose, a few hours earlier. Indeed, it is to be feared that the good curé did not always present so cleanly an appearance as he did on the arrival of the ladies. Here the family lived a quiet life among the peasants, who loved them, and Lucille visited them in their cottages, taking what simple hospitality they could offer her with a charm and appetite unrivalled, as the parishioners themselves have often told the writer. In these humble homes she found children with skins as white, with hair as fair and bright, as her own, and if the traveller wander so far from the beaten track, he can verify my statement. For in Var, by some racial freak—which, like all such matters, is in point of fact inexplicable—a large proportion of the people are of fair or ruddy complexions.

Had the Vicomtesse desired it, the neighbourhood offered society of a loftier, and, as some consider, more interesting, nature, but that lady did not hold much by social gatherings, and it was only from a sense of duty that she invited a few friends, about the time of Lucille's birthday—her twenty-first birthday, indeed—to pass some days at La Pauline.

These friends were bidden for the 26th December, and among them were the Baron Giraud and his son Alphonse.

Alphonse arrived on horseback in a costume which would have done credit to the head-groom of a racing stable. The right-hand twist of his mustache was eminently successful, but the left-hand extremity drooped with a lamentable effect, which he was not able to verify until after he had greeted the ladies, whom he met in the garden, as he rode toward the chateau.

"My father," he cried, as he descended from the saddle, "that dear old man, arrives on the instant. He is in a carriage—a close carriage, and he smokes. Picture it to yourselves—when there is this air to breathe—when there are horses to ride. Madame la Vicomtesse"—he took that lady's hand—"what a pleasure! Mademoiselle Lucille—as beautiful as ever."

"Even more so," replied Lucille with her gay laugh. "What exquisite riding-boots! But are they not a little tight, Alphonse?"

For Lucille could not perceive why playmates should suddenly begin to monsieur and mademoiselle each other after years of intimacy. This was the rock in that path which Alphonse, like the rest of us, found anything but smooth. Lucille was so gay. It is difficult to make serious love to a person who is not even impressed by English riding-boots.

"WHAT EXQUISITE RIDING-BOOTS! BUT ARE THEY NOT A LITTLE
TIGHT, ALPHONSE?"

"WHAT EXQUISITE RIDING-BOOTS! BUT ARE THEY NOT A LITTLE TIGHT, ALPHONSE?"

At this moment the Baron's carriage appeared on the zig-zag road below the chateau, and Madame de Clericy's face assumed an expression of placid resignation. In due time the vehicle, with its gorgeous yellow wheels, reached the level space upon which the party stood. The Baron Giraud emerged from the satin-lined recesses of the dainty carriage like a stout caterpillar from a rose, a stumpy little man with no neck and a red face. A straggling dyed mustache failed to hide an unpleasant mouth, with lips too red and loose. Cunning little dark eyes relieved the countenance of the Baron Giraud from mere animalism. They were intelligent little eyes, that looked to no high things and made no mistake in low places. But the Baron Giraud did not make one proud of the human race. This was a man who handled millions with consummate skill and daring, and by a certain class of persons he was almost worshipped. Personally, a 'longshore loafer who can handle a boat with the same intrepidity is to me a pleasanter object, though skill of any description must command a certain respect.

There were other guests to whom the Baron was presently introduced, and

towards these he carried himself with the pomposity and hauteur which are only permissible to the very highest rank of new wealth. Lucille, as I learnt from Monsieur Alphonse later—indeed, our friendship was based on the patience with which I listened to his talk of that young lady—was dressed on this particular afternoon in white, but such matters as these bungled between two men will interest no one. Her hair she wore half in curls, according to the hideous custom of that day. Is it not always safe to abuse the old fashion? And at no time safer than the present, when the whole world gapes with its great, foolish mouth after every novelty. I remember that Lucille looked pretty enough; but you, mesdames, who laugh at me, are no doubt quite right, and a thousand times more beautiful in your mannish attire.

The guests presently dispersed in the shady garden, and the Baron accepted Madame's offer of refreshment on the terrace, whither a servant brought a tray of liqueurs. The pleasant habit of afternoon tea had not yet been introduced across the channel, and French ladies had still something to learn.

"Ah, Madame!" said the Baron Giraud in a voice that may be described as metallic, inasmuch as it was tinny, "these young people!"

With a wave of his thick white hand he indicated Alphonse and Lucille, who had wandered down an alley entirely composed of orange trees, where, indeed, a yellow glow seemed to hover, so thickly hung the fruit on the branches. Madame followed the direction of his glance with a non-committing bow of the head.

"I shall have to ask Monsieur le Vicomte what he proposes doing in the way of a 'dot,'" pursued the financier with a cackling laugh, which was not silvery, though it savoured of bullion. The Vicomtesse smiled gravely, and offered the Baron one of those little square biscuits peculiar to Fréjus.

"Madame knows nothing of such matters?"

"Nothing," answered she, meeting the twinkling eyes.

"Ah!" murmured the Baron, addressing, it would seem, the distant mountains. "Such details are not, of course, for the ladies. It is the other side of the question"—he laid his hand upon his waistcoat—"the side of the affections—the heart, my dear Vicomtesse, the heart."

"Yes," answered Madame, looking at him with that disquieting straight glance of hers—"the heart."

In the mean time—in the orange alley—Alphonse was attempting to get a serious hearing from Lucille, and curiously enough was making use of the same word as that passing between their elders on the terrace above them.

"Have you no heart?" he cried, stamping his foot on the mossy turf, "that you always laugh when I am serious—have you no heart, Lucille?"

"I do not know what you mean by heart," answered the girl with a little frown, as if the subject did not please her. And wiser men than Alphonse Giraud could not have enlightened her.

"Then you are incapable of feeling," he cried, spreading out his hands as if in invocation to the trees to hear him.

"That may be, but I do not see that it is proved by the fact that I am not always grave. You, yourself, are gay enough when others are by, and it is then that I like you best. It is only when we are alone that you are—tragic. Is that—heart, Alphonse? And are those who laugh heartless? I doubt it."

"You know I love you," he muttered gloomily, and the expression on his round face did not seem at home there.

"Well," she answered, with a severity gathered heaven knows whence—I cannot think they taught it to her in the convent—"you have told me so twice since you became aware of my continued existence at the ball last month. But you are hopelessly serious to-day. Let us go back to the terrace."

She stooped and picked up an orange that had fallen, throwing it subsequently along the smooth turf for her dog to chase.

"See," she said gaily, "Talleyrand will scarcely trouble to run now. He is so stout and dignified. He is afraid that the country dogs should see him. It is Paris. Paris spoils—so much."

"You know my father's plans concerning us," said Alphonse, after a pause, which served to set aside Talleyrand and the orange.

"The Baron's plans are, I am told, wonderful, but"—she paused and gave a little laugh—"I do not understand finance."

They walked up the steps together, between the trim borders, where spring flowers were already breaking into bud. On the terrace they found the

Vicomtesse and the Baron Giraud. A servant was going towards the house carrying carelessly a small silver salver. The Baron was standing with an unopened envelope in his hand.

"You will permit me, Madame," they heard him say with his strident little self-satisfied laugh. "A man of affairs is the slave of the moment. And the affairs of state are never still. A great country moves even in its sleep."

Having the permission of Madame, he tore open the envelope, enjoying the importance of the moment. But his face changed as soon as his glance fell on the paper.

"The government has fallen," he gasped, with white lips and a face wherefrom the colour faded in blotches. He seemed to forget the ladies, and looked only at his son. "It may mean—much. I must go to Paris at once. The place is in an uproar. Mon Dieu—where will it end!"

He excused himself hurriedly, and in a few minutes his carriage rattled through the grey stone gateway.

"An uproar in Paris," repeated Lucille, anxiously, when she was alone with her mother. "What does he mean? Is there any danger? Will papa be safe?"

"Yes," answered the Vicomtesse quietly; "he will be safe, I think."



Chapter VIII

In Paris

"Le plus grand art d'un habile homme est celui de savior cacher son habileté."

It will be necessary to dwell to a certain extent on those events of the great world that left their mark on the obscure lives of which the present history treats. An old man may be excused for expressing his opinion—or rather his agreement with the opinions of greater minds—that our little existence here on earth is but part of a great scheme—that we are but pawns moved hither and thither on a vast chess-board, and that, while our vision is often obscured by some knight or bishop or king, whose neighbourhood overshadows us, yet our presence may affect the greater moves as certainly as we are affected by them.

I first became aware of the fact that my existence was amenable to every political wind that might blow a week or so after Lucille went to La Pauline, without, indeed, vouchsafing an explanation of her sudden coldness.

In my study I was one evening smoking, and, I admit it, thinking of Lucille—thinking very practically, however. For I was reflecting with satisfaction over some small improvements I had effected—with a Norfolk energy which, no doubt, gave offence to some—during the short time that the Vicomte and I had passed in the Provençal chateau. I had the pleasant conviction that Lucille's health could, at all events, come to no harm from a residence in one of the oldest castles in France. No very lover-like reflections, the high-flown will cry. So be it. Each must love in his own way. "Air and water—air and water!" the Vicomte had cried when he saw the men at work under my directions. "You Englishmen are mad on the subject."

While I was engaged in these thoughts the old gentleman came to my room, and in the next few minutes made known to me a new and unsuspected side of his character. His manner was singularly alert. He seemed to be years younger.

"I said I should want a man at my side—young and strong," he began, seating himself. "Let us understand each other, Mr. Howard."

"By all means."

He gave a little laugh, and leaning forward took a quill pen from my writing-table, disliking idle fingers while he talked.

"That time has come, my friend. Do you mean to stand by me?"

"LET US UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER, MR. HOWARD."

"LET US UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER, MR. HOWARD."

"Yes."

"You are a man of few words," he answered, looking at me with a new keenness which sat strangely on his benign features. "But I want no more. The government has fallen—the doctors say the Emperor's life is not worth that!"

And he snapped his finger and thumb, glancing at the clock. It was eight o'clock. We had dined at half-past six.

"Can you come with me now? I want to show you the state of Paris—the condition of the people, the way of their thoughts. One cannot know too much of the ... people—for they will some day rule the world."

"And rule it devilish badly," I added, putting my papers together.

"We shall be late in returning," the Vicomte said to the servant who held the carriage door. I had heard—through my thoughts—the stamping of the horses in the courtyard and the rattle of the harness, but took no great note of them, as the Vicomte had the habit of going out in the evening. I noticed we never crossed the river during our silent drive. A river has two sides, just as a street, and one of them is usually in the shade. It was among the shadows that our business lay this evening.

"You know," said the Vicomte, as we climbed the narrow staircase of a quiet house in the neighbourhood of the great wine stores that adjoin the Jardin des Plantes—"you know that this is the day of the talkers—the Rocheforts, the Pyats—the windbags. Mon Dieu, what nonsense! But a windbag may burst and do harm. One must watch these gentry."

Republicanism was indeed in the air at this time. And has not history demonstrated that those who cry loudest for a commonwealth are such as wish to draw from that wealth and add nothing to it? The reddest Republican is always the man who has nothing to lose and all to gain by a social upheaval.

I was not surprised, therefore, when we found ourselves in a room full of bad hats and unkempt heads. A voice was shouting their requirements. I knew that they wanted a wash more than anything else.

The room was a large, low one, and looked larger through an atmosphere blue with smoke and the fumes of absinthe. The Vicomte—a little man, as I have said—slipped in unperceived. I was less fortunate, being of a higher stature. I saw that my advent did not pass unobserved on the platform, where a party of patriots sat in a row, like the Christy Minstrels, showing the soles of their boots to all whom it might concern. In this case a working cobbler would have been deeply interested, as in a vast field of labour. The Vicomte slipped a few yards away from me, and the shoulders of his fellow-countrymen obscured him. I could find no such retreat, for your true Socialist never has much to recommend him to the notice of society, being usually a poor, mean man to look at, who seeks to add a cubit to his stature by encouraging the growth of his hair.

One such stood on the platform, mouthing the bloodthirsty periods of his creed. He caught sight of me.

"Ah!" he cried, "here is a new disciple. And a hardy one! *Un grand gaillard*, my brethren, who can strike a solid blow for liberty, equality and fraternity. Say, brother, you are with us; is it not so?"

"If you open the casements, not otherwise," I answered. The French crowd is ever ready for blood or laughter. I have seen the Republic completely set in the background by a cat looking in a window and giving voice to the one word assigned to it by nature. Some laughed now, and the orator deemed it wise to leave me in peace. I took advantage of my obscurity to look around me, and was duly edified by what I saw. The Paris *vaurien* is worth less than any man on earth, and these were choice specimens from the gutter.

We were wasting our time in such a galley, and as I thus reflected a note was slipped into my hand.

"Follow me, but not at once." I read and hid the paper in my pocket. Without staring about me too much, I watched the Vicomte make his way towards a door half hidden by a dirty curtain—another to that by which we had entered. Thither I followed him after a decent interval—no one molesting me. One of the patriots on the platform seemed to watch me with understanding, and when I reached the curtained doorway, my glance meeting his, he dismissed me with his eyelids.

I found myself in a dark passage, and with his gentle laugh the Vicomte took my arm.

"All that out there," he whispered, "is a mere blind. It is in the inner room that they act. Out there they merely talk. Come with me. Gently—there are two steps—my dear Howard. These are the men—he paused with his fingers on the handle of a door—who will rule France when the Emperor is dead or deposed."

With that we entered, and those assembled—some sitting at a table, others standing about the room—saluted the Vicomte de Clericy almost as a leader. Some of the faces I knew—indeed, they are to be found in the illustrated histories of France. The thoughts of others were known to me, for many were journalists of repute—men of advanced views and fiery pens. Perhaps, after all, I knew as little of the Vicomte de Clericy as of any man there. For he seemed to have laid aside that pleasant and garrulous senility which had awakened my dull conscience.

Although he did not deliver a speech during the proceedings, as did some, his attitude was rather that of a leader than of a mere on-looker. Here was no mere watching, thought I. My patron was known to all, and went from group to group talking in the ear of many. There was, indeed, much talking as I have always found in the world, and but little listening. The Vicomte introduced me to some of his friends.

"Mr. Howard," he said, "an English gentleman who is kind enough to act as my secretary. Mr. Howard is too wise to trouble himself with politics."

And I thought some of them had a queer way of looking at me.

"A deceiver or a dupe?" I heard one ask another, trusting too far the proverbial dulness of British ears.

The topic of the evening was, of course, the fall of the ministry—a matter of great moment at that time, and, it may be, through all the ages—though a recital of its possible effects would be but dull reading to-day. When a chain is riven, the casual on-looker takes but small interest in the history of each link. This event of December, 1869, was in truth an important link in the chain of strange events that go to make up the history of the shortest and most marvellous of the great dynasties of the world.

I stood among those politicians and wondered what the greatest of their race at

that time living thought of these matters in the Tuileries Palace hard by. I could picture him sitting, as was his wont—a grave man with a keen sense of humour—with his head a little on one side, his large, still face drawn and pale—the evidence of his malady around his dull eyes. Was the game played out? The greatest since that so gloriously won—so miserably lost at length—by his uncle. The Bonapartes were no common men—and it was no common blood that trickled unstanch'd ten years later into the sand of the African veldt, leaving the world the poorer of one of its greatest races.

I gathered that the fall of the ministry was no great surprise to these men assembled in this inner room. They formed, so far as I could discover, a sort of administration—a committee which gathered the opinions of the more intelligent citizens of the larger towns of France—a head-center of news and public thought. Their meeting place was furnished without ostentation, and in excellent taste.

These were no mere adventurers, but men of position and wealth, who had somewhat to lose and every desire to retain the same. They did not rave of patriotism, nor was there any cant of equality and fraternity. It seemed rather that, finding themselves placed in stirring times, they deemed it wise to guide by some means or other the course of events into such channels as might ensure safety to themselves and their possessions. And who can blame them for such foresight? Patriots are, according to my experience, men who look for a substantial *quid pro quo*. They serve their country with the view of making their country serve them.

Whatever the usual deliberations of the body among whom I found myself might be, the all-absorbing topic of the evening set all else aside.

"We approach the moment," cried one, a young man with a lisping intonation and great possessions, as I afterwards learnt. "Now is the time for all to do as I have done. I have sent everything out of the country. I and my sword remain for France."

He spoke truly. He and his sword now lie side by side—in French soil.

"Let all do the same," growled an old man, with eyes flashing beneath his great white brows.

"All who know," suggested one, significantly. Whereupon arose a great discussion, and many names were uttered that were familiar to me—among

others, indeed, that of my friend, John Turner. I noticed that many laughed when his name was mentioned.

"Oh!" they cried. "You may leave John Turner to care for his own affairs. *Il est fin celui-là.*"

Again a familiar name fell on my ears, and this was received with groans and derisive laughter. It was that of the Baron Giraud. I gathered that there was question of warning certain financiers and rich persons outside of this circle of some danger known only to the initiated. Indeed, the wealthy were sending their money out of the country as fast and as secretly as possible.

"No, no," cried the young man I have mentioned; "the Baron Giraud—a fine Baron, heaven knows!—has risen with the Empire—nor has he been over-scrupulous as to whom he trod underfoot. With the Empire he must fall."

And one and all fell to abusing the Baron Giraud. He was a thief, and a despoiler of the widow and orphan. His wealth had been acquired not honestly, but at the expense,—nay, at the ruin—of others. He was an unwholesome growth of a mushroom age—a bad man, whose god was gold and gain his only ambition.

"If such men are to grow in France and govern her, then woe to France," cried one prophetic voice.

Indeed, if half we heard was true of the Baron Giraud, he must have been a fine scoundrel, and I had little compunction in agreeing that he deserved no consideration at the hands of honest men. The cooler heads deemed it wise to withhold from the Baron certain details of the public feeling, not out of spite, but because such knowledge could not be trusted in notoriously unscrupulous hands. He would but turn it to money.

For the greater safety, all present bound themselves upon honour not to reveal the result of their deliberations to certain named persons, and the Baron Giraud had the privilege of heading this list. I was surprised that no form of mutual faith was observed. These men seemed to trust each other without so much as a word—and indeed, what stronger tie can men have than the common gain?

"We are not conspirators," said one to me. "Our movements are known."

And he nodded his head in the direction of the Tuileries. I made no doubt that all, indeed, was known in that quarter, but the fatalist who planned and schemed there would meet these men the next day with his gentle smile, betraying

nothing.

As my interest became aroused by these proceedings, I became aware of the Vicomte's close scrutiny. It seemed that he was watching me—noting the effect of every speech and word.

"You were interested," he said, casually, as we drove home smoking our cigars.

"Yes."

He looked out of the carriage window for some time, and then, turning, he laid his hand on my knee.

"And it is not a game," he said, with his little laugh, which somehow sounded quite different—less senile, less helpless. "It is not a game, my friend!"



Chapter IX

Finance

"Il n'est pas si dangereux de faire du mal à la plupart des hommes que de leur faire trop de bien."

We have seen how the Baron Giraud was called suddenly away from those pleasures of the country, which he had taken up too late in life, as many do, to the busy—ay, and stormy—scenes of Paris existence during the winter before the great war. It was perhaps a week later—one morning, in fact, soon after the New Year—that my business bade me seek the Vicomte in his study adjoining my own. These two apartments, it will be remembered, were separated by two doors and a small intervening corridor. In the days when the Hôtel Clericy was built, walls had ears, and every keyhole might conceal a watching eye. Builders understood the advantage of privacy, and did not construct rooms where every movement and every spoken word may be heard in the adjoining chambers.

No sound had come to me, and I had no reason for supposing the Vicomte engaged at so early an hour. But as I entered the room, after knocking and awaiting his permission as usual, I saw that some one was leaving it by the other door. His back was presented to my sight, but there was no mistaking the slim form and a nonchalant carriage. Charles Misté again! And only the back of him once more.

"I have had a visit from my late secretary," said the Vicomte, casually, and without looking up from his occupation of opening some letters. There was no reason to suppose that he had seen me glance towards the closing door, recognising him who went from it.

We were still engaged with the morning's correspondence, when a second visitor was announced, and almost on the heels of the servant a little fat man came puffing into the room, red-faced and agitated.

"Ah! Heaven be thanked that I have found you in," he gasped, and although it was a cold morning, he wiped his pasty brow with a gorgeous silk handkerchief whereupon shone the largest coronet obtainable.

His face was quite white and flaccid, like the unbaked loaves into which I had poked inquiring fingers in my childhood, and there was an unwholesome look of fear in his little bright eyes. The Baron had been badly scared, and lacked the manhood to conceal his panic.

"Ah! Mon Dieu, mon Dieu!" he gasped again, and looked at me with insolent

inquiry. He was, it must be remembered, a very rich man, and could afford to be ill-mannered. "I must see you, Vicomte."

"You do see me, my friend," replied the old nobleman, in his most amiable manner. "And at your service."

"But—" and the fluttering handkerchief indicated myself.

"Ah! Let me introduce you. Monsieur Howard, my secretary—the Baron Giraud."

I bowed as one only bows to money-bags, and the Baron stared at me. Only very rich or very high-born persons fully understand the introductory stare.

"You may speak before Monsieur Howard," said the Baron, quietly. "He is not a secretary *pour rire*."

Had Miste been a secretary *pour rire*, I wondered?

I drew forward a chair and begged the Baron to be seated. He accepted my invitation coldly, and seating himself seemed to lose nothing in stature. There are some men who should always be seated. It is, of course, a mistake to judge of one's neighbour at first sight, but it seemed to me that the Baron Giraud only wanted a little courage to be a first-class scoundrel. He fumbled in his pocket, glancing furtively at me the while. At length he found a letter, which he handed to the Vicomte.

"I have received that," he said. "It is anonymous, as you will see, and cleverly done. There is absolutely no clue. It was sent to my place of business, and my people there telegraphed for me in Provence. Of course I came at once. One must sacrifice everything to affairs."

Naturally I acquiesced fervently, for the last remark had been thrown to me for my good.

The Vicomte was looking for his spectacles.

"But, my friend," he said, "it is atrociously written. One cannot decipher such a scrawl as this."

In his impatience the Baron leant forward, and taking the paper from my patron, handed it to me.

"Here," he said, "the secretary—read it aloud."

Nothing loth, I read the communication in my loudest voice. The world holds that a loud voice indicates honesty or a lack of brain, and the Baron was essentially of that world. The anonymous letter was a warning that a general rising against the rule of the Emperor was imminent, and that in view of the probable state of anarchy that would ensue, wise men should not delay in transferring their wealth to more stable countries. Precisely—in a word—the information that it had been decided to withhold from the recipient of the letter.

THE BARON BLEW AND PUFFED LIKE A PRIZE-FIGHTER WHEN I HAD FINISHED THE PERUSAL. "THERE," HE CRIED; "I RECEIVE A LETTER LIKE THAT—I, THE BARON GIRAUD—OF THE HIGH FINANCE."
THE BARON BLEW AND PUFFED LIKE A PRIZE-FIGHTER WHEN I HAD FINISHED THE PERUSAL. "THERE," HE CRIED; "I RECEIVE A LETTER LIKE THAT—I, THE BARON GIRAUD—OF THE HIGH FINANCE."

The Baron blew and puffed like a prize-fighter when I had finished the perusal.

"There," he cried; "I receive a letter like that—I, the Baron Giraud—of the high finance."

"My poor friend, calm yourself," urged the Vicomte.

It is easy enough to tell another to calm himself, but who among us can compass such a frame of mind when he is hit in a vital spot? The Baron wiped his forehead nervously.

"But," he said, "is it true?"

The Vicomte spread out his hands, and never glanced at me as an ordinary man would have done towards one who shared his knowledge.

"Who can tell—but yes! So far as human foresight goes—it is true enough."

"Then what am I to do?"

I stared at the great financier asking such a question. Assuredly he, of all men, needed no one's counsel in a matter of money.

"Do as I have done," said the Vicomte; "send your money out of the country."

An odd look came over the Baron's face. He glanced from one of us to the other—with the cunning, and somewhat the look, of a cat. The Vicomte was blandly

indifferent. As for me, I had, I am told, a hard face in those days—hardened by weather and a disbelief in human nature which has since been modified.

"It is a responsibility that you take there," said the financier.

"I take no responsibility. A man of my years, of my retired life, knows little of such matters." (I thought he looked older as he spoke.) "I only tell you what I have done with my small possessions."

The Baron shook his head with a sly scepticism. After all, the cheapest cunning must suffice for money-making, for I dare swear this man had little else.

"But how?" he said.

"In bank notes, by hand," was the Vicomte's astonishing answer. And the Baron laughed incredulously. It seems that the highest aim of the high finance is to catch your neighbour telling the truth by accident. It would almost be safe to tell the truth always, so rarely is it recognised.

It was not until the Vicomte produced his bankbook and showed the amounts paid in and subsequently withdrawn that the Baron Giraud believed what he had been told. My duties, it may be well to mention in passing, had no part in the expenditure of the Vicomte de Clericy. I had only to deal with the income derived from the various estates, and while being fully aware that large sums had been placed within the hands of his bankers, I had not troubled to be curious respecting the ultimate destination of such moneys. My patron possessed, as has already been intimated, a lively—nay, an exaggerated—sense of the value of money. He was, indeed, as I remember thinking at this time, somewhat of a miser, loving money for its own sake, and not, as did the Baron Giraud, merely for the grandeur and position to be purchased therewith.

"But I am not like you," said the financier at length.

"No; you have a thousand louis for every one that I possess."

"But I have nothing solid—no lands, no estates except my chateau in Var."

His panic had by no means subsided, and presently he found himself on the verge of tears—a pitiable, despicable object. The Vicomte—soothing and benevolent—went on to explain more fully the position of his own affairs. He told us that on information received from a sure source he had months earlier concluded that the Emperor's illness was of a more serious nature than the

general public believed.

"You, my dear friend," he said, "engaged as you have been in the affairs of the outside world—the Suez Canal, Mexico, the Colonies—have perhaps omitted to watch matters nearer home. While looking at a distant mountain one may fall over a little stone—is it not so?"

He had, he informed us, withdrawn his small interest in such securities as depended upon the stability of the Government, but that for men occupying a public position, either by accident of birth or—and he bowed in his pleasant way towards the Baron—by the force of their genius, to send their money out of France by the ordinary financial channels would excite comment, and perhaps hasten the crisis that all good patriots would fain avoid. He talked thus collectedly and fairly while the Baron Giraud could but wipe his forehead with a damp handkerchief and gasp incoherent exclamations of terror.

"I could realize a couple of million," said the financier, "in two days, but there is much that I cannot sell just now—the fall of the government makes it necessary to hold much that I could have sold at a profit a fortnight ago."

The Vicomte was playing with a quill pen. How well I knew the action! It seemed that the millionaire was recovering from his shock, of which re-establishment the outward and visible sign was a dawning gleam of cunning in the eyes.

"But I have no one I can trust," he said; and I almost laughed, so well the words bespoke the man. "It is different for you," he added; "you have—Monsieur."

And he glanced keenly at me. Indeed, we were a queer trio; and I began to think that I was as big a scoundrel as my maiden aunts maintained.

"I would trust Mr. Howard with all my possessions," said the old Vicomte, looking at me almost affectionately; "but in this matter I have found another messenger, less valuable to me personally, less necessary to my comfort and daily happiness, but equally trustworthy."

"And if I gave him twenty million francs to take abroad for me—?" suggested the great financier.

"Then, my friend, we should be in the same boat—that is all."

"*Your* boat," said the Baron, with an unpleasant laugh.

Monsieur de Clericy shrugged his shoulders and smiled. This grave political crisis had rejuvenated him, and he seemed to rise to meet each emergency with a buoyancy that sat strangely on white hairs.

They talked together upon the fascinating topic, while I, who had no part in the game, sat and listened. The Baron was very cunning, and, as it seemed to me, very contemptible. With all the vices that are mine, I thank heaven that I have never loved money; for that love, it seems, undermines much that is manly and honest in upright hearts. Money, it will be remembered, was at the root of the last quarrel I had with my father—the last fatal breach, which will have to be patched up in another world. Money has, as it will be seen by such as care to follow me through these pages, dogged my life from beginning to end. I have run my thick head against those pursuing it, each in his different manner, getting lamentably in their way, and making deadly enemies for myself.

Monsieur de Clericy, in his frank and open way, gave fuller details of his own intentions. It seemed that his possessions were at that moment in the house—in a safe hiding-place; that the messenger was to make several journeys to London, carrying at one time a sum of money which would be no very pleasant travelling companion. A safe depository awaited the sums in England, and, in due course, reinvestment would follow. Money, it will be suspected, was by now beginning to be somewhat of a red rag for me, and I thought I saw some signs of its evil influence over my kindly patron. He spoke of it almost as if there were nothing else on earth worth a man's consideration. In the heat of argument he lowered his voice, and was no longer his open, genial self.

What astonished me most, however, was the facility with which the Baron made a catspaw of him. For the old Vicomte slowly stepped down as it were from his high standpoint of indifference, and allowed himself to be interested in the financier's schemes. It was out of keeping with the attitude which my patron had assumed a few days earlier at the meeting which we had attended, and I was more than ever convinced that the Vicomte was too old and too simple to hold his own in a world of scoundrels.

The Baron led him on from one admission to another, and at last it was settled that twenty millions of francs were to be brought to the Hôtel Clericy and placed in the Vicomte's keeping. To my mind the worst part of the transaction lay in the fact that the financier had succeeded in saddling my patron with a certain moral responsibility which the old man was in no way called upon to assume.

"Then," he said, "I may safely leave the matter thus in your hands? I may sleep to-night?"

"Ah!" replied the other. "Yes—you may sleep, my friend."

"And Monsieur shares the responsibility?" added the upstart, turning to me.

"Of course—for all I am worth," was my reply, and I did not at the time think that even the Vicomte, whose faculties were keener in such matters, saw the sarcasm intended by the words.

"Then I am satisfied," the Baron was kind enough to say; and I thought that his low origin came suddenly to the fore in the manner in which he bowed. A low origin is like an hereditary disease—it will bear no strain.

"By the way," he said, pausing near the door, having risen to go, "you have not told me the name of your trusted messenger."

And before the Vicomte opened his lips the answer flashed across my mind.

"Charles Miste," he said.



Chapter X

The Golden Spoon

"Nous avons tous assez de force pour supporter les maux d'autrui."

A few days later I received a letter from Madame de Clericy. "I write," it ran, "to tell you of the satisfaction that Lucille and I have found in the improvements you initiated here. I laugh—mon ami—when I think of all that you did in three days. It seems as if a strong and energetic wind—such as I imagine your English breezes to be—had blown across my old home, leaving it healthier, purer, better; leaving also those within it somewhat breathless and surprised. I suppose that many Englishmen are like you, and suspect that they will some day master the world. We have had visitors, among others Alphonse Giraud, whom I believe you do not yet know. If contrasts are mutually attractive, then you will like him. I wonder if you know, or suspect, that he is more or less an acknowledged aspirant to Lucille's hand, but—"

Madame de Clericy had run her pen through the last word, leaving it, however, legible. And here she began a new subject, asking me, indeed, to write and give her news of the Vicomte. I am no indoor man or subtle analyst of a motive—much less of a woman's motive, if, indeed, women are so often possessed of such, as some believe—but the obliterated word and Madame de Clericy's subsequent embarkation on a new subject made me pause while I deciphered her letter.

It had originally been arranged that the Vicomte should follow the ladies to La Pauline, leaving me in Paris to attend to my duties, but the sudden political crisis led to a delay in his departure. In truth, I gathered from Madame's letter that he must have written to her saying that the visit was at present impossible. Madame, in fact, asked me to advise her by return of the state of the Vicomte's health, and plainly told me that if business matters were worrying him she would return to Paris without delay.

And if Madame returned she would bring Lucille with her, and thus put an end to the aspirations of Alphonse Giraud, for the prosecution of which the seclusion of La Pauline afforded excellent opportunity. I had but to write a word to bring all

this about. Did Madame de Clericy know all that she placed within my power? Did she know, and yet place it there purposely? Who can tell? I remembered Lucille's coldness—her departure without one word of explanation. I recollected that the twenty million francs at that moment in the Hôtel Clericy would, in due course, be part of Alphonse Giraud's fortune. I was mindful, lastly, that in England we are taught to ride straight, and I sat down and wrote to Madame that her husband was in good health, and that I quite hoped to see him depart in a few days for La Pauline. I will not deny that the letter went into the post-box followed by a curse.

We may, however, write letters and post them. We may—if we be great men—indite despatches and give them into the hands of trusty messengers, and a little twirl of Fortune's wheel will send all our penmanship to the winds.

While I was smoking a pipe and deciphering a long communication received from the gentleman who further entangled my affairs in England, a visitor was announced to me.

"Monsieur Alphonse Giraud."

"Why?" I wondered as I rose to receive this gentleman. "Why, Monsieur Alphonse Giraud?"

He was already in the doorway, and, I made no doubt, had conceived an ultra-British toilet for the occasion. For outwardly he was more English than myself. He came forward, holding out his hand, and I thought of Madame's words. Were we to become friends?

"Monsieur Howard," he said, "I have to apologise. Mon Dieu!—to think that you have been in Paris three months, and I have never called to place myself at your disposition! And a friend of Alfred Gayerson, of that good, stout John Turner—of half a dozen hardy English friends of mine."

I was about to explain that his oversight had a good excuse in the fact that my existence must have been unknown to him, but he silenced me with his two outstretched hands, waving a violent negation.

"No—no!" he said, smiting himself grievously on the chest. "I have no excuse. You say that I was ignorant of your existence—then it was my business to find it out. Ignorance is often a crime. An English gentleman—a sportsman—a fox-hunter! For you chase the fox, I know. I see it in your brown face. And you

belong to the English Jockey Club—is it not so?"

I admitted that it was so, and Alphonse Giraud's emotion was such that he could only press my hand in silence.

"Ah, well!" he cried almost immediately, with the utmost gaiety. "We have begun late, but that is no reason why it should not be a good friendship—is it?"

And he took the chair I offered with such hearty good-will that my cold English sympathy was drawn towards him.

"I came but yesterday from the South," he went on. "Indeed, from La Pauline, where I have been paying a delightful visit. Madame de Clericy—so kind—and Mademoiselle Lucille—"

He twisted up the unsuccessful side of his mustache, and gave a quick little sigh. Then he remembered his scarf, and attended to the horseshoe pin that adorned it.

"You know my father," he said, suddenly, "the—er—Baron Giraud. He has been more fortunate than myself in making your acquaintance earlier."

I bowed and said what was necessary.

"A kind man—a dear man," said the Baron's son. "But no sportsman. Figure to yourself—he fears an open window."

He laughed and shrugged his little shoulders.

"I dare say many Englishmen would not understand him."

"I am not of those," replied I. "I understand him and appreciate his many able qualities."

From which it will be seen that I can lie as well as any man.

"The poor dear has been called to Paris, on his affairs. Not that I understand them. I have no head for affairs. Even my tailor cheats me—but what will you? He can cut a good coat, and one must forgive him. My father's hotel in the Champs Elysées is uninhabitable at the moment. The whitewashers!—and they sing so loud and so false, as whitewashers ever do. The poor man is desolated in an *appartement* in the Hôtel Bristol. I am all right. I have my own lodging—a mere bachelor kennel—where I hope to see you soon and often."

He threw his card on the table, rising to go, and timing his departure with that

tact and grace which is only compassed by Frenchmen or Spaniards.

Scarcely had I regained my room, after duly admiring Alphonse Giraud's smart dog-cart, when the servant again appeared. The Baron Giraud had arrived to see the Vicomte, who happened to be out. The affairs of the Baron were urgent, and he desired to see me—was, indeed, awaiting me with impatience in Monsieur de Clericy's study.

Thither I hastened, and found the great financier in that state of perturbation and perspiration which the political crisis seemed to have rendered chronic. He was, however, sufficiently himself to remember that I was a paid dependent.

"How is this?" he cried. "I call to see the Vicomte on important affairs, and he is out."

"It is," I replied, "that the Vicomte de Clericy is not a man of affairs, but a gentleman of station and birth—that this is not an office, but a nobleman's private house."

And I suppose I looked towards the door, for the Baron gasped out something that might have been an apology, and looked redder in the face.

"But, my good sir," he whined distractedly, "it is a matter of the utmost gravity. It is a crisis in the money market. A turn of the wheel may make me a poor man. Where is the Vicomte? Where are my twenty million francs?"

"The Vicomte has gone out, as is his custom before déjeuner, and your twenty millions are, so far as I know, safe in this house. I have not the keeping of either."

"But you took the responsibility," snapped the Baron.

"For all that I am worth—namely, one hundred and twenty pounds a year, out of which I have to find my livery."

"Can you go out and find the Vicomte? I will wait here," asked the Baron, in the utmost distress. It is indeed love that makes the world go round—love of money.

"I know where he is usually to be found," was my reply, "and can go and seek him. I will return here in half an hour if I fail to find him."

"Yes—yes; go, my good sir—go! And God be with you!" With which inappropriate benediction he almost pushed me out of the room.

On making inquiries of the servants, I found my task more difficult than I had anticipated. Monsieur de Clericy had not taken the carriage, as was his habit. He had gone out on foot, carrying, as the butler told me, a bundle of papers in his hand.

"They had the air of business papers of value—so closely he held them," added the man.

He had taken the direction of the Boulevard, with the intention, it appeared, of calling a cab. I hurried, however, to the Vicomte's favourite club, and learned that he had not been seen there. His habits being more or less known to me, I prosecuted my search in such quarters as seemed likely, but without success.

At the Cercle de l'Union I ran against John Turner, who was reading the *Times* there.

"Ah!" he said, "young Howard. Come to lunch, I suppose. You look hungry—gad, what a twist you had that day! Just in time. I can tell you what is worth eating."

"Thanks; you know such advice is wasted on a country boor like myself. No; I came seeking the Vicomte de Clericy. Have you seen him?"

"Ah! you are still with old Clericy; thought you were up to some mischief—so d—d quiet. Then Mademoiselle is kind?"

"Mademoiselle is away," I answered. "Do you know anything of the Baron Giraud?"

"Do I know anything of the devil," growled John Turner, returning to the perusal of his newspaper. "Are he and old Clericy putting their heads together? I would not trust Giraud with ten sous so far as the club door."

"Exactly!"

"Then he and old Clericy *are* at it—are they?" said John Turner, looking at me over the *Times* with his twinkling eyes. "And you, Monsieur, *le secrétaire*, are anxious about your patron. Ha, ha! You have a lot to learn yet, Master Dick."

I looked impatiently at the clock. Twenty minutes had already been wasted in my fruitless search.

"Then you haven't seen de Clericy?"

"No—my good boy—I haven't. And if you cannot find him you may be sure that it is because he does not want to be found."

The words followed me as I left the room. It seemed that John Turner believed in no man.

There was nothing for it but to return to the Rue des Palmiers, and tell the Baron that I had failed to find my patron. The cab I had hired was awaiting me, and in a few minutes I was rattling across the bridge of the Holy Fathers.

"Monsieur le Vicomte returned a few minutes ago," the butler told me. "He has gone to the study, and is now with the Baron Giraud. The Vicomte asked that you should go to him at once."

The atmosphere of the old house seemed gloomy and full of foreboding as I ran up the stairs. The servant stood at the open door and watched me. In that unknown world behind the green baize door more is known than we suspect, and there is often no surprise there when we who live above stairs are dumbfounded.

In my haste I forgot to knock at Monsieur de Clericy's door before opening it—indeed, I think it was ajar.

"My good friend," I heard as I entered the room, "collect yourself. Be calm. We are together in a great misfortune—the money has been stolen!"

The voice was that of my patron. I went in and closed the door behind me. For it seemed, to my fancy, that there were other doors ajar upon the landing, and listeners on the stairs.

The two old men were facing each other, the one purple in the visage, with starting eyes, the other white and quiet.

"Stolen?" echoed the Baron in a thick voice, and with a wild look round the room. "Then I am ruined!"

The old Vicomte spread out his trembling hands in despair, a gesture that seemed to indicate a crumbling away of the world beneath us.

The Baron Giraud turned and looked at me. He did not recognise me for quite ten seconds.

"IT IS DEATH," I ANSWERED, WITH MY HAND INSIDE THE BARON'S SHIRT. "WHO STOLE THAT MONEY?" THE VICOMTE LOOKED AT ME.

"CHARLES MISTE," HE SAID.

"IT IS DEATH," I ANSWERED, WITH MY HAND INSIDE THE BARON'S SHIRT. "WHO STOLE THAT MONEY?" THE VICOMTE LOOKED AT ME. "CHARLES MISTE," HE SAID.

"Then it is not you," he said, thickly. "As you are there. You did not steal it."

"No—I did not steal it," I answered quietly, for there was a look in his face that I did not understand, while it frightened me. Suddenly his eyes shot red—his face was almost black. He fell forward into my arms, and I tore his collar off as I laid him to the ground.

"Ah, mon Dieu, mon Dieu!" the Vicomte was crying as he ran hither and thither, wringing his hands, while I attended, unskillfully enough, to the stricken man. "Ah, mon Dieu! what is this?"

"It is death," I answered, with my hand inside the Baron's shirt. "Who stole that money?"

The Vicomte looked at me.

"Charles Miste," he said.

Chapter XI

Theft

"La fortune ne laisse rien perdre pour les hommes heureux."

I thus returned Alphonse Giraud's visit sooner than either of us anticipated, for I had to go and tell him what had happened in the Rue des Palmiers. I delivered my news in as few words as possible, and cannot tell how he took the evil tidings, for when I had spoken I walked to the window, and there stood looking down into the street.

"Have you told me all?" asked Giraud at length, wondering, perhaps, that I lingered.

"No."

I turned and faced him, the little French dandy, in his stiff collar and patent-leather boots—no bigger than a girl's. The politeness of our previous intercourse seemed to have fallen away from us.

"No—I have not told you all. It seems likely that you, like myself, have been left a poor man."

"Then we have one reason more for being good friends," said Giraud, in his quick French way.

He rose and looked round the room.

"All the same, I have had a famous time," he said. "Come, let us go to my father."

We found the Hôtel Clericy in that state of hushed expectation which follows the dread visit in palace and hut alike. The servants seemed to have withdrawn to their own quarters to discuss the event in whispers there. We found the Vicomte in my study, still much agitated and broken. He was sitting in my chair, the tears yet wet upon his wrinkled cheek. There was a quick look of alertness in his eyes, as if the scythe had hissed close by in reaping the mature grain.

"Ah! my poor boy—my poor boy," he cried when he saw Alphonse, and they embraced after the manner of their race.

"And it is all my fault," continued the broken old man, wringing his hands and sinking into his chair again.

"No!" cried Alphonse, with characteristic energy. "We surely cannot say that, without questioning—well—a wiser judgment than ours."

He paused, and perhaps remembered dimly some of the teaching of a good, simple bourgeoisie who had died before her husband fingered gold. I sought to quiet the Vicomte also. Old men, like old clothes, need gentle handling. I sat down at my table and began to write.

"What are you doing?" asked the Vicomte, sharply.

"I am telegraphing to Madame de Clericy to return home."

There was a silence in the room while I wrote out the message and despatched it by a servant. The Vicomte made no attempt to stop me.

"Here," he said, when the door was closed—and he handed Giraud the key of his own study. "The doctors and—the others—have placed him in my room—that is the key. You must consider this house as your own until the funeral is over; your poor father's house, I know, is in disorder."

Monsieur de Clericy would have it that the Baron should be buried from the Rue des Palmiers, which Alphonse Giraud recognised as in some sort an honour, for it proclaimed to the world the esteem in which the upstart nobleman was held in high quarters.

"I am glad," said my patron, with that air of fatherliness which he wore towards me from the first, "that you have telegraphed for my wife—the house is different when she is in it. When can she be here?"

"It is just possible that she may be with us to-morrow at this time—by driving rapidly to Toulon."

"With promptitude," muttered the Vicomte, musingly.

"Yes—such as one may expect from Madame."

The Vicomte looked up at me with a smile.

"Ah!—you have discovered that. One is never safe with you men who know horses. You find out so much from observation."

But I think it is no great thing to have discovered that one may usually look for prompt action in men and women of a quiet tongue.

Lucille's name was not mentioned between us. My own desires and feelings had been pushed into the background by the events of the last few days, and he is but half a man who cannot submit cheerfully to such treatment at the hand of Fate from time to time.

During the day we learnt further details respecting the theft of the money, amounting in all to rather more than eight hundred thousand pounds of our coinage. Miste, it appeared, had been instructed to leave Paris by the eight o'clock train that morning for London, taking with him a large sum. The Vicomte had handed him the money the previous evening.

"I carelessly replaced the remainder in the drawer of my writing-table," my patron told us, "before the eyes of that scoundrel. I went to the drawer this morning, having been uneasy about so large a sum—it was arranged that I should see Miste off from the Gare du Nord. Figure to yourselves! The drawer was empty. I hastened to the railway station. Miste was, of course, not there."

And he rocked himself backwards and forwards in the chair. What trouble men take for money—what trouble it brings them! So distressed was he that it would perhaps have been wiser to change the current of his thoughts, but there was surely work here for an idle man like myself to do.

"How was the money to be conveyed?" I asked.

"In cheques of ten thousand pounds each, drawn by John Turner on various European and American bankers in favour of myself."

"And you had indorsed these cheques?"

"No."

"Then how can Miste realise them?" I asked.

"By forgery—my friend," replied the Vicomte sadly. Which was true enough. I thought of Monsieur Miste's graceful figure—of his slim neck, and longed to get my fingers around it. I had only seen his back, after all—and had a singular

desire to know the look of his face. I am no great reader, but have met some words which go well with the thoughts I harboured at this time of Monsieur Charles Misté, for I could

"Read rascal in the motions of his back,
And scoundrel in the subtle sliding knee."

Seeing that I had risen, the Vicomte asked me where I was going, in a tone of anxiety which I had noted in his voice of late, and, in my vanity, attributed to the fact that he was in some degree dependent upon myself.

"I am going to see John Turner, and then I am going to seek Charles Misté until I find him."

Before I knew what had happened, Alphonse Giraud was shaking my hand, and would have embraced me had he not remembered in time his English clothes, and the reserve of manner usually observed inside such habiliments.

"Ah! my friend," he said, desperately, "the world is large."

"Yes; but not roomy enough for Monsieur Charles Misté and your humble servant."

I spent the remainder of the day with John Turner, who was cynical enough about the matter, but gave me, nevertheless, much valuable information.

"You may be sure," he said, "that I did not sign the cheques until Clericy and the Baron had handed over the equivalent in notes and gold. One man's scare is another man's profit."

And my stout friend chuckled. He heard my plans and laughed at them.

"Very honourable and fine, but out of date," he said. "You will not catch him, but you will, no doubt, enjoy the chase immensely, and in the mean time you will leave a clear field for Alphonse Giraud *auprès de* Mademoiselle."

I instituted inquiries the same evening, and determined to await the result before setting off to seek Misté in person. Nor will I deny that this decision was brought about, in part, by the reflection that Madame de Clericy and Lucille might arrive the following morning.

At the Lyons station the next morning I had the satisfaction of seeing the two

ladies step from the Marseilles express. Lucille would scarcely look at me. During the drive to the Rue des Palmiers I acquainted Madame with the state of affairs, and she listened to my recital with a grave attention and a quiet occasional glance into my face which would have made it difficult to tell aught but the truth.

When we reached home Alphonse Giraud had gone out; the Vicomte was still in his room. He had slept little and was much disturbed, the valet told us. As we mounted the stairs, I saw the two ladies glance instinctively towards the closed door of the Vicomte's study. We are all curious respecting death and vice. Madame went straight to her husband's apartment. At the head of the stairs the door of the morning-room stood open. It was the family rendezvous, where we usually found the ladies at the luncheon hour.

Lucille went in there, leaving the door open behind her. I have always rushed at my fences, and have had the falls I merited. I followed Lucille into the sunlit room. She must have heard my footsteps, but took no notice—walking to the window, and standing there, rested her two hands on the sill while she looked down into the garden.

"Mademoiselle!"

She half turned her head with a little haughty toss of it, looking not at me, but at the ground beneath my feet.

"Well, Monsieur?"

"In what have I offended you?"

She shrugged her shoulders, and I, looking at her as she stood with her back to me, knew again and always that the world contained but this one woman for me.

"Since I told you of my feeling towards yourself," I went on, "and was laughed at for my pains, I have been careful not to take advantage of my position in the house. I have not been so indiscreet again."

She was playing with the blind-cord in an attitude and humour so youthful that I had a sort of tugging at the heart.

"Perhaps, though," I continued, "I have offended in my very discretion. I should have told you again—that I love you—that you might again enjoy the joke."

She stamped her foot impatiently.

"Of course," she said, "you are cleverer than I—you can be sarcastic, and say things I do not know how to answer."

"You can at least answer my question—Mademoiselle."

She turned and faced me with angry eyes.

"Well—then. I do not like the ways of English gentlemen."

"Ah!"

"You told me that you were not poor, but rich—that you had not become my father's secretary because such a situation was necessary, but—but for quite another reason."

"Yes."

"And I learn immediately afterwards from Mr. Gayerson that you are penniless, and must work for your living."

"Merely because Alfred Gayerson knew more than I did," I replied. "I did not know that my father in the heat of a passing quarrel had made such a will—or, indeed, could make it if he so desired. I was not aware of this when I spoke to you—and, knowing it now, I must ask you to consider my words unsaid. You may be sure that I shall not refer to them again, even with the hope of making you merry."

She laughed suddenly.

"Oh," she said, "I find plenty to amuse me—thank you. You need not give yourself the trouble. *D'ailleurs*," she paused and looked at me with a quick and passing gravity, "that has never been your rôle, Monsieur l'Anglais—you are not fitted for it."

She pulled a long face—such as mine, no doubt, appeared in her eyes—and left me.

I had business that took me across the Seine during the morning, and lunched at a club—so did not again see the ladies until later in the day. The desire of speech with Alphonse Giraud on a matter connected with his father's burial took me back to the Rue des Palmiers in the afternoon, when I learnt from the servant that

the Baron's son had returned, and was, so far as he knew, still in the house. I went to the drawing-room and there found Madame alone.

"I am seeking Monsieur Alphonse Giraud," I said.

"Whose good genius you are."

"Not that I am aware of, Madame."

"No," she said, slowly, "that is just it. In a crowded street the strongest house does not know how many weaker buildings are leaning against it. Alphonse Giraud is not a strong house. He will lean against you if you permit it. So be warned."

"By my carelessness," I answered, "I have done Alphonse Giraud a great injury—I have practically ruined him. Surely the least I can do is to attempt to recover for him that which he has lost."

Madame de Clericy was of course engaged in needlework. I never saw her fingers idle. It appeared that at this moment she had a difficult stitch to execute.

"One never knows," she said, without looking up, "what is the least or the most that men can do. We women look at things in a different light, and therefore cannot say what is right or what is wrong; it is better that men should judge for themselves."

"Yes," I said.

"Of course," said Madame de Clericy quietly, "if you recover Alphonse's fortune you will earn his gratitude, for without it the Vicomte would never recognise his pretensions to Lucille's hand."

"Of course," I answered; and Madame's clever eyes were lifted to my face for a moment.

"You think it the least you can do?"

"I do," said I. "Can you tell me if Alphonse Giraud is in this house?"

MADAME LOOKED AT ME AGAIN. AND I MADE MY INQUIRIES
ELSEWHERE.

MADAME LOOKED AT ME AGAIN. AND I MADE MY INQUIRIES ELSEWHERE.

"No; I cannot."

"Perhaps Mademoiselle Lucille—"

"Perhaps. You can ask her—if you like."

Madame looked at me again. And I made my inquiries elsewhere.



Chapter XII

Ruin

"Il ne faut regarder dans ses amis que la seule vertu qui nous attache à eux."

If the Baron Giraud was unable in the nature of human affairs to take his wealth with him, it accompanied him, at all events, to the grave, where feathers made a fine show of grief, where priests growled consolatory words, and cherub-faced boys swung themselves and censers nonchalantly along. Some who owed their wealth to Giraud sent their empty carriages to mourn his decease; others, with a singular sense of fitness, despatched wreaths of tin flowers to be laid upon his grave.

The Vicomte had been early astir that morning; indeed, I heard him moving before daylight in the room where the coffin was. I was glad when that same morning dawned, for my kind old patron seemed unhinged by these events, and could not keep away from the apartment where the Baron lay.

There was, of course, no keeping him from the funeral, which ceremony I also attended, and if ever earth was laid to earth it was when we consigned the great financier to his last resting-place. Alphonse Giraud, in his absurd French way, embraced me when the last carriage drove away from the gates of Père la Chaise.

"And now, mon ami," he said, with a sigh of relief, "let us go and lunch at the club."

He meant no disrespect towards his departed sire. It was merely that his elastic nature could not always be at a tension. His quick bright face was made for smiles, and naturally relaxed to that happy state. He clapped me on the back.

"You are my best friend," he cried.

And I had, indeed, arranged the funeral for him. Those who had honoured the ceremony with their presence showed much sympathy for Alphonse. They pressed his hand; some of them embraced him. A few—elderly men with

daughters—told him that they felt like fathers towards him. All this Alphonse received with a bland innocence which his Parisian education had no doubt taught him.

When they were gone, rattling away in their new carriages, he looked after them with a laugh.

"And now," he said, "for ruin. I wonder what it will be like—new at all events. And we all live for novelty nowadays. There is the price of a luncheon at the club, however. Come, my friend, let us go there."

"One change you must, at all events, be prepared for," I said, as we stepped into his carriage. "A change of friends."

Alphonse understood and laughed. Cynicism is an arid growth, found to perfection on the pavement, and this little Frenchman wore his boots out thereon.

During luncheon my host recovered his spirits; although, to do him justice, he was melancholy enough when he remembered his recent loss. Once or twice he threw down his knife and fork, and for quite three minutes all food and drink were nauseous to him.

"Ah!" he cried, "that poor old man. It tears the heart to think of him."

He sat for a few moments with his chin in the palm of his hand, and then slowly took up again the things of this life, wielding them heartily enough.

"I wonder," he went on in a reflective voice, "if I did my duty towards him. It was not difficult, only to make a splash and spend money, and I did that—beautifully!"

"Coffee and chartreuse," he said to the waiter, when we had finished. "And leave the bottle on the table. You know," he added, addressing me, his face beaming with conscious pride, his hand laid impressively on my arm—"you know this club drinks chartreuse in claret glasses. It is our great distinguishing feature."

While religiously observing this law we fell to discussing the future.

"One cannot," observed my companion, philosophically, "bring on the thunderstorm, however heavy the air may be. One can only gasp and wait. I suppose the crash will come soon enough. But tell me how I stand; I have not had time to think the last few days."

He had, indeed, thought only of others.

"We have," answered I, "done all that is possible to stop the payment of these cheques; but a clever villain might succeed in realising them one by one in different parts of the world, and thus outwit us."

"I wonder how it is," said my companion, afloat on a side issue like any woman, "that a fool like myself—an incompetent ass with no brains, eh?—always finds such a friend as you."

He leant forward and tapped me on the chest in his impulsive way, as if sounding that part of me.

"A solid man," he added, apparently satisfied with the investigation.

"I do not know," answered I, truthfully enough; "unless it be that solid men are fools enough to place themselves in such a position."

"How have you placed yourself in such a position? When you have finished that cup of coffee—you have no sugar, by the way—you have but to take your hat and—'*Bon jour.*' You leave me still in your debt."

With a few quick gestures he illustrated his argument, so that I saw myself—somewhat stiff and British, with my hat upon my head—quit the room, having wished him good day, and leaving him overwhelmed in my debt in a chair.

"I told your father that I would share the responsibility as regarded the safety of his money," I replied. "It was said only half in earnest, but he took it seriously."

"Ah! the poor, dear man! He always took money matters seriously," put in Alphonse.

"I am, at all events, going to try to recover your wealth for you. Besides, I have a singular desire to twist the neck of Monsieur Charles Misté. I ought to have known that the Vicomte was too old to be trusted with the arrangement of affairs such as that. Your father knew it, but thought that I was taking an active part in the matter. I was a fool."

"Ah!" said Alphonse Giraud. "We are all fools, *mon cher*, or knaves."

And long afterwards, remembering the words, I recognised that truth often bubbles to the lips of irresponsible people.

I told him of my plans, which were simple enough, for I had called in the aid of men whose profession it was to deal with scoundrels. It is only until we know vice that we think it complicated or interesting. There is really no man so simple as your thorough scoundrel. A picture all shade is less difficult to comprehend than one where light and shade are mingled. I had only asked to be put on the track of Charles Miste, for evil men, like water, run in one channel and one direction only. I wished to deal with him myself, law or no law. Indeed, there had been a sufficiency of law and lawyers in my affairs already.

"And I will help you," exclaimed Alphonse Giraud, when he had heard, not without interruption, my proposed plan of campaign. "I will go with you."

"No; you cannot do that. You may be sure that Miste has accomplices who will, of course, watch you, and warn him the moment they suspect you of being on the right scent. Whereas I am nobody. Miste does not even know me. I wish I knew him."

And I remembered with regret how ignorant I was.

"Besides," I added, "you surely have other calls. The Vicomte requires some one near him—the ladies will be glad of your advice and assistance."

He was scarcely the man to whom I should have applied for either, but one can never tell with women. Some of them look up to us when we know in our hearts that we are no better than asses.

We talked of details which may well be omitted here, for the majority of them were based upon assumptions subsequently to be proved erroneous. It seemed that Alphonse Giraud had almost given up hope of recovering his lost wealth, and as I raised this anew in his breast so his face grew graver. A great hope makes a grave face.

"You must not," he said, "make me believe that, unless you have a good foundation for your own faith."

"Oh, no!" I answered, and instinctively changed the subject. His gravity disturbed me.

But he returned to his thought again and again.

"It is not the money," he said at length, when I, who knew what was coming, could no longer hold him. "It is—" he paused, his face suddenly red as he looked

hard into his coffee-cup. "It is Lucille."

I made no answer, and it was Alphonse who spoke again, after a pause.

"What a hard face you have, mon ami!" he said. "I never noticed it before. I pity that poor Miste, you know—if you catch him."

The same evening I spoke to my old patron, whom I found in the morning-room, where he sat alone and in meditation. The doors of his own study were still locked, and no one was allowed to enter there. His manner was so feverish and unnatural that I almost abandoned my project of leaving the Rue des Palmiers.

"Ah!" he said, "what a terrible day—and that poor Alphonse! How did you leave him?"

I thought of Alphonse as I had left him, smiling under his mourning hat-band, waving a black glove gaily to me in farewell.

"Oh," I answered, "Alphonse will soon be himself again."

"Ah, my friend," exclaimed the Vicomte, after a sorrowful pause. "The surprises of life are all unpleasant. Pfit!" he spread out his hands suddenly as if indicating a quick flight, "and I lose a friend and four hundred thousand francs in the twinkling of an eye. To think that a mere shock can kill a man as it killed the poor Baron."

"He had no neck, and systematically ate too much," I said. "I am now going to see if we cannot repair some of the harm that has been done."

"How?" asked the old man, with all the suspicion that had recently come into his character.

"I am going to look for Miste."

He shook his head.

"Very quixotic, but quite useless," said he; and then set himself to dissuade me from my quest with every argument that he could bring to bear upon me. Some of these, indeed, I thought he might well have omitted.

"We cannot spare you at this time, when the political world is so disturbed, and internal affairs are on the brink of catastrophe. We cannot spare you, I, the Vicomtesse—Lucille. It was only last night that she was rejoicing at your

presence with us in our time of trouble. I shall tell her that you wish to leave us, and she will, I am sure, dissuade you."

Which threat he carried out, as will be recorded later. I was, however, fixed in my determination, and only gave way in so far as to promise to return as soon as possible. These details are recorded thus at length, as they are all links of a chain which pieced itself together later in my life. Such links there are in the story of every human existence, and no incident seems to stand quite alone.

After dinner that evening I went to my own study, leaving the Vicomte to join the ladies in the drawing-room without me. So far as I was able I had arranged during the last few days the affairs which had been confidingly placed in my care, and desired to leave books and papers in such a condition that a successor could at once take up the thread of management.

The Vicomte was so disturbed at the mention of my departure that the topic had been carefully avoided during dinner, though I make no doubt that he knew my purpose in refusing to go to the drawing-room.

I was at work in my room—between the two tall candles—when the rustle of a woman's dress in the open doorway made me look up. Lucille had come into the room—her eyes bright, her cheeks flushed. And I knew, or thought I knew, her thoughts.

"My father tells me that you are going to leave us," she said in her impetuous way.

"Yes, Mademoiselle."

"I have come to ask you not to do so. You may—think what you like."

I did not look at her, but guessed the expression of her determined lips.

"And you are too proud," I said, "to explain. You think that I, like a schoolboy, am going off in a fit of wounded vanity—pleased to cause a little inconvenience, and thus prove my own importance. You think that it is yourself who sends me away, and your father cannot afford to lose my services at this time. You consider it your duty to suppress your own feelings, and tread under foot your own pride—to serve the Vicomte. Your pride further prompts you to give me permission to think what I like of you. Thank you, Mademoiselle."

I was making pretence, in a shallow way no doubt, to study the papers on the

table, and Lucille standing before my desk was looking down at my bent head, noting perhaps the grey hairs there. Thus we remained for a minute in silence.

Then turning, she slowly left the room, and I would have given five years of my life to see the expression of her face.



Chapter XIII

The Shadow Again

"Qui ne craint pas la mort craint donc la vie."

As I sat in my study, the sounds of the house gradually ceased, and the quiet of night settled down between its ancient walls. It seemed to me at times that the Vicomte was moving in his own room. I knew, however, that the passage between us was locked on both sides. My old patron had said nothing to me on the subject, but I had found the door bolted and the key removed. I never was the man to intrude upon another's privacy, and respected the Vicomte's somewhat incomprehensible humour at this time.

I scarcely knew at what hour I at last went to bed; but the oil in my lamp was nearly exhausted and the candles had burnt low. Taking up one of these, I went to my bedroom, pausing at the head of the black staircase to listen as one instinctively does in a great silence. The household was asleep. A faint patter broke the stillness; Lucille's dog—a small white shadow in the gloom—came towards me from her bedroom, outside of which he slept. He looked up at me with a restrained jerk of the tail, for we were always friends, and his expression said:

"Anything wrong?"

He glanced back over his shoulder to Lucille's door, as if to intimate that his own charge was, at all events, safe; then he passed me, and pressed his inquiring nose to the threshold of the Vicomte's study door. He was a singular little dog, with a deep sense of responsibility, which he only laid aside in Lucille's presence. In which he resembled his betters. Men are usually at ease of mind in the presence of one woman only. At night I often heard him blowing the dust from his nostrils at the threshold of my door, whither he came to satisfy himself that I was in my room and all well in the house before he sought his own mat.

When I went softly to my bedroom he was still sniffing at the study door.

I must have slept a couple of hours only when my door handle was quietly turned, and, being a light sleeper, I became aware of a presence in the room

before a touch was laid upon my shoulder. It was Madame de Clericy.

"Where is my husband?" she asked, and added: "I thought he was sitting up with you."

"No; I have been alone all the evening," answered I, with a quick feeling of uneasiness.

"I do not think that he is in the house at all," said Madame, moving towards the door. "Will you get up and dress? You will find me in the morning-room."

Lighting my candle, this woman of few words left me. The dawn was creeping up over the opposite roof and through the open window; the freshness of the March air made me shiver as I hurried into my clothes. In the morning-room I found Madame de Clericy.

"Mother," Lucille had once said to me, "always rises to the occasion, but the process is not visible."

"Come quietly," said Madame, speaking, as indeed was her habit in regard to myself, with a certain kindness and sympathy—"come quietly; for Lucille is asleep. I have been to see."

She took it for granted that she and I should consider Lucille before all else, and the assumption gave me pleasure. Although she said "Come," she stood aside and allowed me to lead the way. We naturally went first to the study. The door was locked. At the entrance from my own room we were again met by bars.

"Can you break it open?" asked Madame.

"Not without noise. Let us make sure that he is not elsewhere in the house first."

Together we went up and down the old dwelling, and I traversed many corridors and chambers for the first time. We found nothing. It was beginning to get light when we returned to my study.

"Shall I break open the door?" I asked, when I had unbarred the shutters.

"Yes," answered Madame.

The door was a solid one of walnut, and not to be broken open by mere pressure. While I was moving some of the chairs in order to give myself a run, Lucille came into the room. She had hurried on a dressing-gown and her hair was all

down her back, but she was much too simple-minded to think that such things mattered at such a moment.

"What is it?" she cried. "What *are* you doing?"

Madame explained, and the two stood hand in hand while I made ready to burst in upon the mystery that lay behind that closed door.

I took a run, and brought my shoulder to bear just above the lock, wrenching the four screws out of the wood by the force of the blow. I staggered into the dark passage beyond, with a sore shoulder and my heart in my mouth. Madame and Lucille followed. I tried the handle of the door leading from the passage to the Vicomte's study. The key had not been turned.

"I will go in alone," I said, laying a hand on Madame's arm, who gave me a candle and made no attempt to follow me.

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After all, the precaution was unnecessary, for the room was empty.

"You may come," I said; and the ladies stood in the dimly lighted chamber. None of us had entered there since the Baron Giraud had come to occupy it in his coffin. The dust was thick on the writing-table. Some flowers, broken from the complimentary wreaths, lay on the floor. The air was heavy. I kicked the withered lilies towards the fireplace, and looked carefully round the room. The furniture was all in order. Madame went to the window and threw it open. A river steamer, moving cautiously in the dawning light, cast its booming note over the housetops towards us. The frog in the fountain—a family friend—was croaking comfortably in the courtyard below us.

"Lucille, my child," said Madame, quietly, "go back to bed. Your father is not in the house. It will explain itself to-morrow."

But the face that Madame turned towards me, when her daughter had reluctantly left us, was not one that looked for a pleasant solution to the mystery. It is said that wherever a man may be cast he makes a little world around him. But it seemed rather that for me a world of hope and fear and interest and suspense was

forming itself, despite me, encompassing me about so that I could not escape it.

"I will go out," I said to Madame, and left her abruptly. I had no plan or intention—for where could I seek the Vicomte at that hour—but a great desire came over me to get away from this gloomy house, where trouble seemed to move and live.

The streets were empty. I walked slowly to the *quai*, and then, turning to the left, approached the palace of the D'Orsays, which stood then, though to-day, in a fine irony, the broken walls alone remain, amid the new glory of republican Paris. I knew I was going in the wrong direction, and at length, with a queer feeling of shame, turned and crossed to the Isle St. Louis.

Of course, the Vicomte had not done away with himself! The idea was absurd. Aged men do not lay violent hands upon themselves. It was different for Pawle, a friend of mine, who had shot himself as he descended the club stairs, a ruined man. Nevertheless, I walked instinctively towards the Cathedral of Notre Dame, and past that building to the little square house—like a roadside railway station—where Paris keeps her nameless dead.

Half guiltily I went in at one door and out by the other. Two men lay on the slates—the lowest of the low—and even the sanctifying hand of death could not allay the conviction that the world must necessarily be the richer for their removal from it. I came away and walked towards the river again. Standing on one of the bridges, I never knew which, I looked down at the slow green water. As I stood a municipal guard passed me with a suspicious glance. The clocks of the city struck six in a solemn jangle of tones. The boats were moving on the river—the great unwieldy barges as big as a ship. The streets were now astir. Paris seemed huge and as populous as an ant-hill. I felt the hopelessness of seeking unaided one who purposely hid himself in its streets.

I went back to the Morgue and made some inquiries of the attendant there. Nay, I did more—for why should a man be coward enough to shut his eyes to patent fact?—I gave my name and address to the courteous official and asked him to send for me should any news come his way. It was plain enough that the Vicomte de Clericy had of late been in such a state of mind that the worst fears must needs be kept in view.

I went back to the Faubourg St. Germain and crept quietly into the house of my patron by the side door, of which he himself had given me the key. Despite my noiseless tread, Madame was waiting for me at the head of the stairs.

"Nothing?" she asked.

"Nothing," replied I, and avoided her persistent eyes. To share an unspoken fear is akin to the knowledge of a common crime.

At nine o'clock I sought John Turner in his apartment in the Avenue D'Antan, almost within a stone's throw of the British Embassy. There are some to whom one naturally turns in time of trouble and perplexity, while the existence of others who are equally important in their own estimation is at such moments forgotten. Our fellows seem to move around us in a circle—some step out of the rank and touch us as they pass—one, if it please God, comes out and stands beside us. John Turner had, I suppose, touched me in passing. He was at breakfast when I was shown into his presence.

"You are looking fresh and well," he said, in his abrupt way, "so I suppose you are engaged in some mischief."

"Not exactly. But what I began in play is continuing in earnest."

"Yes," he said, looking at me with his easy smile while he dropped a piece of sugar into his coffee-cup. "Yes; young men are fond of walking into streams without ascertaining the depth on the farther side."

"I suppose you were young yourself once?" retorted I, bringing forward a chair.

"Yes—but I was always fat. Women always laughed at me behind my back. And, with a woman half the fun is to let you know her intention as she passes. I returned the compliment in my sleeve."

"I do not see what women have to do in this matter," said I.

"No—but I do. How is Mademoiselle this morning? Sit down; have a cup of coffee, and tell me all about her."

I sat down, and related to him the events of the past night. Turner's face was grave enough when I had finished, and I saw him note with some surprise that he had allowed his coffee to get cold.

"I don't like the sound of it," he said. "One never knows with a Frenchman—he is never too old to talk of his mother, or make an ass of himself."

The English banker was of the greatest assistance to me during that most anxious day. But we found no clew, nor discovered any reason for the Vicomte's

disappearance. I went back in the evening to the Hôtel Clericy, and there found Madame de Clericy and Lucille awaiting me, with that calmness which is admirable when there is nothing else but waiting to be done.

It was at eight o'clock in the evening that the explanation came, from a source as natural as it was unexpected. A letter was delivered by the postman for Madame de Clericy, who at once recognized her husband's unsteady handwriting. She crossed the room, and stood beside me while she opened the envelope. Lucille, seeing the action, frowned, as I thought. I was still under displeasure—still learning that the better sort of woman will not forgive deception so long as she herself is its motive, as cheap cynics would have us believe.

Madame read the letter with that self-repression which was habitual to her, and made me ever wonder what her youth had been. Lucille and I watched her in silence.

"There," she said, and gave me the letter to pass to Lucille, who received it from my hand without taking her eyes from her mother's face. Then I quitted the room, leaving the two women alone. Madame followed me presently to the study, and there gave me the Vicomte's last letter to read. It was short and breathed of affection.

"Do not seek for me," it ran. "I cannot bear my great misfortunes, and the world will, perhaps, be less cruel to two women who have no protector."

Madame handed me the envelope, which bore the Passy postmark, and I read her thoughts easily enough.

I saw John Turner again that evening, also Alphonse Giraud, who had called at the Hôtel Clericy during the day. With these gentlemen I set off the next morning for Passy, taking passage in one of those little river steamers which we had all seen a thousand times, without thinking of a nearer acquaintance.

"This is gay," cried Alphonse, on whom the sunshine had always an enlivening effect, as we sped along. "This is what you call sport—*n'est ce pas*? For you are a maritime race, is it not so, Howard?"

"Yes," answered I, "we are a maritime race."

"And figure to yourself this is the first time that I am afloat on anything larger than a ferry-boat."

During our short trip Alphonse fully decided that if his fortune should be recovered he would buy a yacht.

"Do you think you can recover it?" he asked quite wistfully, his mind full of this new scheme, and oblivious to the mournful object of our journey.

At Passy we were received with shrugging shoulders and outspread hands.

No, such an old gentleman had not been seen—but the river was large and deep. If one wanted—mon Dieu!—one could do such a thing easily enough. To drag the river—yes—but that cost money. Ten francs a day for each man. It was hard work out there in the stream. And if one found something—name of a dog—it turned on the stomach.

We arranged that two men should drag the river, and, after a weary day, went back to Paris no wiser than we came.

In this suspense a week passed, while I, unwilling to touch my patron's papers until we had certain news of his death, could render little assistance to Madame de Clericy and Lucille. That the latter resented anything in the nature of advice or suggestion was soon made clear enough to me. Nay! she left no doubt of her distrust, and showed this feeling whenever we exchanged words.

"It is a small thing upon which to condemn a man, Mademoiselle," I said to her one morning when chance left us together. "I told you what I thought to be the truth. Fate ruled that I was after all a poor man—but I have not been proved a liar."

"I do not understand you," she answered, with hard eyes. "You are such a strange mixture of good and bad."

An hour afterwards I received a telegram advising me that the body of the Vicomte de Clericy had been found in the river at Passy.



Chapter XIV

A Little Cloud

"Rien ne nous rend si grand qu'une grande douleur."

Alphonse Giraud and I—between whom had sprung up that friendship of contrasts which Madame de Clericy had foreseen—were in constant communication. My summons brought him to the Hôtel Clericy at once, where he found the ladies already apprised of their bereavement. He and I set off again for Passy, by train this time, as our need was more urgent. I despatched instructions to the Vicomte's lawyer to follow by the next train—bringing the undertaker with him. There was no heir to my patron's titles, but it seemed necessary to observe every formality at this the dramatic extinction of a long and noble line.

As we drove through the streets, the newsboys were shrieking some tidings which we had neither time nor inclination to inquire into at that moment. It was a hot July day, and Paris should have been half empty, but the pavements were crowded.

"What is the matter?" I said to Alphonse Giraud, who was too busy with his horse to look about. "See the faces of the men at the cafés—they are wild with excitement and some look scared. There is news afoot."

"My good friend," returned Giraud, "I was in bed when your note reached me. Besides, I only read the sporting columns of the papers."

So we took train to Passy, without learning what it was that seemed to be stirring Paris as a squall stirs the sea.

At Passy there was indeed grim work awaiting us. The Préfet himself was kind enough to busy himself in a matter which was scarcely within his province. He had instructed the police to conduct us to his house, where he received us most hospitably.

"Neither of you is related to the Vicomte?" he said, interrogatively; and we stated our case at once.

"It is well that you did not bring Madame with you," he said. "You forbade her to come?"

And he looked at me with a keenness which, I trust, impressed the police official for whose benefit it was assumed.

"I begged her to remain in Paris."

"Ah!" and he gave a significant laugh. "However—so long as she is not here."

He was a white-faced man, who looked as if he had been dried up by some blanching process. One could imagine that the heart inside him was white also. In his own eyes it was evident that he was a vastly clever man. I thought him rather an ass.

"You know, gentlemen," he said, as he prepared his papers, "the recognition of the body is a mere formality."

"Then let us omit it, Monsieur le Préfet," exclaimed Alphonse, with characteristic cheerfulness; but the remark was treated with contempt.

"In July, gentlemen," went on the Préfet, "the Seine is warm—there are eels—a hundred animalculæ—a score of decomposing elements. However, there are the clothes—the contents of Monsieur le Vicomte's pockets—a signet ring. Shall we go? But first take another glass of wine. If the nerves are sensitive—a few drops of Benedictine?"

"If I may have it in a claret glass," said Alphonse, and he launched into a voluble explanation, to which the Préfet listened with a thin, transparent smile. I thought that he would have been better pleased had some of the Vicomte's titled friends come to observe this formality. But one's grand friends are better kept for fine weather only, and the official had to content himself with the company of a private secretary and the son of a ruined financier.

Alphonse and I had no difficulty in recognizing the small belongings which had been extracted from my old patron's sodden clothing. In the letter case was a letter from myself on some small matter of business. I pointed this out, and signed my name a second time on the yellow and crinkled paper for the further satisfaction of the lawyer. Then we passed into an inner room and stood in the presence of the dead man. The recognition was, as the Préfet had said, a painful formality. Alphonse Giraud and I swore to the clothing—indeed, the linen was marked plainly enough—and we left the undertaker to his work.

Giraud looked at me with a dry smile when we stood in the fresh air again.

"You and I, Howard," he said, "seem to have got on the seamy side of life lately."

And during the journey I saw him shiver once or twice at the recollection of what we had seen. His carriage was awaiting us at the railway station. Alphonse had been brought up in a school where horses and servants are treated as machines. The man who stood at the horse's head was, however, anything but mechanical, for he ran up to us as soon as we emerged from the crowded exit.

"À BERLIN—À BERLIN."
"À BERLIN—À BERLIN."

"Monseieur le Baron!" he cried excitedly, with a dull light in his eyes that made a man of him, and no servant. "Has Monsieur le Baron heard the news—the great tidings?"

"No—we have heard nothing. What is your news?"

"The King of Prussia has insulted the French Ambassador at Ems. He struck him on the face, as it is said. And war has been declared by the Emperor. They are going to march to Berlin, Monsieur!"

As he spoke two groups of men swaggered arm in arm along the street. They were singing "Partant pour la Syrie," very much out of tune. Others were crying "À Berlin—à Berlin!"

Alphonse Giraud turned and looked at me with a sudden rush of colour in his cheeks.

"And I, who thought life a matter of coats and neckties," he said, with that quick recognition of his own error that first endeared him to me and made him the better man of the two.

We stood for a few minutes watching the excited groups of men on the Boulevard. At the cafés the street boys were selling newspapers at a prodigious rate, and wherever a soldier could be seen there were many pressing him to drink.

"In Berlin," they shouted, "you will get sour beer, so you must drink good red wine when it is to be had." And the diminutive bulwarks of France were ready enough, we may be sure, to swallow Dutch courage.

"In Berlin!" echoed Giraud, at my side. "Will it end there?"

"There or in Paris," answered I, and lay no claim to astuteness, for the words were carelessly uttered.

We drove through the noisy streets, and Frenchmen never before or since showed themselves to such small advantage—so puerile, so petty, so vain. It was "Berlin" here and "Berlin" there, and "Down with Prussia" on every side. A hundred catchwords, a thousand raised voices, and not one cool head to realize that war is not a game. The very sellers of toys in the gutter had already nicknamed their wares, and offered the passer a black doll under the name of Bismarck, or a monkey on a stick called the King of Prussia.

It was with difficulty that I brought Alphonse Giraud to a grave discussion of the pressing matter we had in hand, for his superficial nature was open to every wind that blew, and now swayed to the tempest of martial ardour that swept across the streets of Paris.

"I think," he said, "I will buy myself a commission. I should like to go to Berlin. Yes—Howard, *mon brave*, I will buy myself a commission."

"With what?"

"Ah—mon Dieu!—that is true. I have no money. I am ruined. I forgot that."

And he waved a gay salutation of the whip to a passing friend.

"And then, also," he added, with a face suddenly lugubrious, "we have the terrible business of the Vicomte. Howard—listen to me—at all costs the ladies must never see *that*—must never know. Dieu! it was horrible. I feel all twisted here—as when I smoked my first cigar."

He touched himself on the chest, and with one of his inimitable gestures described in the air a great upheaval.

"I will try to prevent it," I answered.

"Then you will succeed, for your way of suggesting might easily be called by another name. And it is not only the women who obey you. I told Lucille the other day that she was afraid of you, and she blazed up in such a fury of denial that I felt smaller than nature has made me. Her anger made her more beautiful than ever, and I was stupid enough to tell her so. She hates a compliment, you

know."

"Indeed, I have never tried her with one."

Alphonse looked at me with grave surprise.

"It is a good thing," he said, "that you do not love her. Name of God! where should I be?"

"But it is with Madame and not Mademoiselle Lucille that we shall have to do this afternoon," I said hastily.

Although he was more or less acknowledged as an aspirant to Lucille's hand, Giraud refused to come within the door when we reached the Hôtel Clericy.

"No," he answered; "they will not want to see me at such a time. It is only when people want to laugh that I am required."

I found Madame quite calm, and all her thoughts were for Lucille. The more a man is brought into contact with maternal love, even if it bear in no way upon his own life, the better he will be for it—for this is surely the loftiest of human feelings.

My own mother having died when I was but an infant, it had never been my lot to live in intimacy with women, until fate guided me to the Hôtel Clericy.

At no time had I felt such respect for that quiet woman, Madame de Clericy, as on this afternoon when widowhood first cast its sable veil over her.

"Lucille," she said at once, "must not be allowed to grieve for me. She has her own sorrow to bear, for she loved her father dearly. Do not let her have any thought for me."

And later, when the gods gave me five minutes alone with Lucille herself—

"You must not," she said, her face drawn and white, her lips quivering, "you must not let mother think that this is more than I can bear. It falls heavier upon her."

I blundered on somehow during those two days, making, no doubt, a hundred mistakes; for what comfort could I offer? What pretence could I make to understand the feelings of these ladies? My task was not so difficult as I had anticipated in regard to the grim coffin lying at Passy. To spare the other, both

ladies agreed with me separately that the Vicomte should be buried from Passy as quietly as possible, and Lucille overlooked the fact that the suggestion came from such an unwelcome source as myself.

So, amid the wild excitement of July, 1870, we laid Charles Albert Malaunay, Vicomte de Clericy, to rest among his ancestors in the little church of Senneville, near Nevers. The war fever was at its height, and all France convulsed with passionate hatred for the Prussian.

It is not for one who has found his truest friends—ay, and his keenest enemies—in France to say aught against so great and gifted a people. But it seems, as I look back now, that the French were ripe in 1870 for one of those strokes by which High Heaven teaches nations from time to time through the world's history that human greatness is a small affair.

There are no people so tolerant of folly as the Parisians. It walks abroad in the streets of the great city with such unblushing self-satisfaction—such a brazen sense of its own superiority—that any Englishman must long to import a hundred London street boys, with their sense of ridicule and fearless tongue. At all times the world has possessed an army of geniuses whose greatness consists of faith and not of works—of faith in themselves which takes the outward form of weird clothing, long hair, and a literary or artistic pose. Paris streets were so full of such in 1870 that all thoughtful men could scarce fail to recognise a nation in its decadence.

"The asses preponderate in the streets," said John Turner to me. "You may hear their bray in every café, and France is going to the devil."

And indeed the voices raised in the drinking dens were those of the fool and the knave.

I busied myself with looking into the money affairs of my poor patron, and found them in great disorder. All the ready cash had fallen into the hands of Miste. Some of the estates, as, indeed, I already knew, yielded little or nothing. The commerce of France was naturally paralysed by the declaration of war, and no one wanted a vast old house in the Faubourg St. Germain—a hotbed of Legitimism where no good Buonapartist cared to own a friend or show his face.

I disguised nothing from Madame de Clericy, whom indeed it was hard to deceive.

"Then," she said, "there is no money."

We were in my study, where I was seated at the table, while Madame moved from table to mantelpiece with a woman's keen sight for the blemishes to be found in a bachelor's apartment.

"For the moment you are in need of ready money—that is all. If the war is brought to a speedy termination, all will be set right."

"And if the war is not brought to a speedy termination—you are a second-rate optimist, *mon ami*—what then?"

"Then I shall have to find some expedient."

She looked at me probingly. The windows were open, and we heard the cries of the newsboys in the streets.

"Hear!" she said; "they are shouting of victories."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"You mean," said the Vicomtesse slowly, "that they will shout of victories until the Prussians are in sight of Paris."

"The Parisians will pay two sous for good news, and nothing at all for evil tidings," I answered.

Thus we lived for some weeks, through the heat of July—and I could neither leave Paris nor give thought to Charles Misté. That scoundrel was, however, singularly quiet. No cheque had been cashed, and we knew, at all events, that he had realised none of his stolen wealth. On the tenth of July the Ollivier Ministry fell. Things were going from bad to worse. At the end of the month the Emperor quitted St. Cloud to take command of the army. He never came to France again.



Chapter XV

Flight

"Repousser sa croix, c'est l'appesantir."

During the first week of August the excitement in Paris reached its greatest height, and culminated on the Saturday after the battle of Weissenburg. Of this defeat John Turner had, as I believe, the news before any other in Paris. Indeed, the evil tidings came to the city from the English *Times*. The stout banker, whose astuteness I had never doubted, displayed at this time a number of those qualities—such as courage, cool-headedness and foresight—to which we undoubtedly owe our greatness in the world. We are, as our neighbours say, a nation of shopkeepers, but we keep a rifle under the counter. A man may prove his courage in the counting-house as effectually as on the field of battle.

"These," I said to Turner, "are stirring times. I suppose you are very anxious."

I had passed before the Bourse in coming to the Avenue d'Antan, and had, as I spoke, a lively recollection of the white-faced and panic-stricken financiers assembled there. For one franc that these men had at stake, it was probable that John Turner had a thousand.

"Yes—I am anxious," he said, quietly. "These are stirring times, as you say; they stimulate the appetite wonderfully, and, I think, help the digestion."

As he spoke a clerk came into the room without knocking—his eyes bright with excitement. He gave John Turner a note, which that stout gentleman read at a glance, and rose from the breakfast table.

"Come with me," he said, "and you will see some history."

We drove rapidly to the Bourse, through crowded streets, and there I witnessed a scene of the greatest excitement that it has been my lot to look upon; for it has pleased God to keep me from any battle-field.

Above a sea of hats a score of tricolour flags fluttered in the dusty air, and wild strains of the Marseillaise dominated the roar and babble of a thousand tongues wagging together. The steps of the great building were thronged with men, and on the bases of the statuary orators harangued high heaven, for no man had the patience to listen.

"What is it?" I asked my companion.

"News of a French victory; but it wants confirmation."

A MAN CLAMBERED ON THE BOX BESIDE THE COACHMAN. "I WILL SING YOU THE MARSEILLAISE!" HE SHOUTED.
A MAN CLAMBERED ON THE BOX BESIDE THE COACHMAN. "I WILL SING YOU THE MARSEILLAISE!" HE SHOUTED.

Some who could sing, and others who only thought they could, were shouting the Marseillaise from any elevation that presented itself—an omnibus or a street refuse-box served equally well for these musicians.

"How on earth these people have ever grown to a great nation!" muttered John Turner, who sat in his carriage. A man clambered on the box beside the coachman.

"I will sing you the Marseillaise!" he shouted.

"Thank you," replied John Turner.

But already the humour of the throng was changing, and some began to reflect. In a few minutes doubt swept over them like a shower of rain, and the expression of their faces altered. Almost immediately it was announced that the news of the victory had been a hoax.

"I am going to my office," said Turner, curtly. "Come and see me to-morrow morning. I may have some advice to give you."

In the evening I saw Madame, and told her that things were going badly on the frontier; but I did not know that the Germans were, at the time of speaking, actually on French territory, and that MacMahon had been beaten at Metz.

"Get the women out of the country," said John Turner to me the next morning, "and don't bother me."

I went back to the Hôtel Clericy and there found Alphonse Giraud. He was in the morning-room with the two ladies.

"I have come," he said, "to bid you all good-by, as I was just telling these ladies.

"You remember," he went on, taking my hand and holding it in his effusive French way—"you remember that I said I would buy myself a commission? The good God has sent me one, but it is a rifle instead of a sword."

"Alphonse has volunteered to fight as a common soldier!" cried Lucille, her face glowing with excitement. "Is it not splendid? Ah, if I were only a man!"

Madame looked gravely and almost apprehensively at her daughter. She did not join in Giraud's proud laugh.

"There is bad news," she said, looking at my face. "What is it?"

"Yes, there is bad news, and it is said that Paris is to be placed under martial law. You and Mademoiselle must leave."

Alphonse protested that it was only a temporary reverse, and that General Frossard had but retreated in order to strike a harder blow. He nodded and winked at me, but I ignored his signals; for I have never held that women are dolls or children, that the truth must be withheld from them because it is unpleasant.

So Alphonse Giraud departed to fight for his country. He was drafted into a cavalry regiment, "together with some grooms and hostlers from the stables of the Paris Omnibus Company," as he wrote to me later in good spirits. He proved himself, moreover, a brave soldier as well as a true and honest French gentleman.

Madame de Clericy and Lucille made preparations for an early departure, but were averse to quitting Paris until such time as necessity should drive them into retreat. I saw nothing of John Turner at this time, but learnt from others that he was directing the course of his great banking house with a steady hand and a clear head. I wanted money, but did not go to him, knowing that he would require explanations which I was in no wise prepared to give him. Instead I telegraphed to my lawyer in London, who negotiated a loan for me, mortgaging, so far as I could gather from his technical communications, my reversion of Hopton in case Isabella Gayerson should marry another than myself. The money was an absolute necessity, for without it Madame and Lucille could not leave France, and I took but little heed of the manner in which it was procured.

It was in the evening of August 28th, a few hours after General Trochu's decree calling upon foreigners to quit Paris, that I sought a consultation with Madame. The Vicomtesse came to my study, divining perhaps that what I had to say to her were better spoken in the absence of Lucille.

"You wish to speak to me, *mon ami*," she said.

In reply I laid before her the proclamation issued by General Trochu. In it all foreigners were warned to leave, and persons who were not in a position to "*faire*

face à l'ennemi" invited to quit Paris. She glanced through the paper hurriedly.

"Yes," she said; "I understand. You as a foreigner cannot stay."

"I can stay or go," I replied; "but I cannot leave you and Mademoiselle in Paris."

"Then what are we to do?"

I then laid before her my plan, which was simple enough in itself.

"To England?" said Madame de Clericy, when I had finished, and in her voice I detected that contempt for our grey country which is held by nearly all Frenchwomen. "Has it come to that? Is France then unsafe?"

"Not yet—but it may become so. The Germans are nearer than any one allows himself to suppose."

I saw that she did not believe me. Madame de Clericy was not very learned, and it is probable that her history was all forgotten. Paris had always seemed to her the centre of civilisation and safely withdrawn from the perils of war or internal disorder.

I begged her to leave the capital, and painted in lurid colours the possible effects of further defeat and the resulting fall of the French Empire.

"See," I said, opening the drawer of my writing table, "I have the money here. All is prepared, and in England I have arranged for your reception at a house which, if it is not palatial, will at all events be comfortable."

"Where is the house?"

"At a place called Hopton, on the border of Suffolk and Norfolk. It stands empty and quite ready for your reception. The servants are there."

"And the rent?" said she, without looking at me. "Is that within our means?"

"The rent will be almost nominal," I replied. "That can be arranged without difficulty. Many of our English country houses are now neglected. It is the fashion for our women, Madame, to despise a country life. They prefer to wear out themselves and their best attributes on the pavement."

Madame smiled.

"Everything is so strong about you," she said; "especially your prejudices. And

this house to which we are to be sent—is it large? Is it well situated? May one inquire?"

I could not understand her eyes, which were averted with something like a smile.

"It is one of the best situated houses in England," I answered, unguardedly, and Madame laughed outright.

"My friend," she said, "one reason why I like you is that you are not at all clever. This house is yours, and you are offering Lucille and me a home in our time of trouble—and I accept."

She laid her hand, as light as a leaf, on my shoulder, and when I looked up she was gone.

On the morning of Saturday, September 3d, I received a note from John Turner.

"If you have not gone—go!" he wrote.

Our departure had been fixed for a later date, but the yacht of an English friend had been lying in the port of Fécamp at my disposal for some days. We embarked there the same evening, having taken train at the St. Lazare station within two hours of the receipt of John Turner's warning. The streets of Paris, as we drove through them, were singularly quiet, and men passing their friends on the pavement nodded in silence, without exchanging other greeting. Hope seemed at last to have folded her wings and fled from the bright city. Some indefinable knowledge of coming catastrophe hovered over all.

It was a quiet sunset that clothed sea and sky with a golden splendour as we steamed out of Fécamp harbour that evening. I walked on the deck of the trim yacht with its captain until a late hour, and looked my last on the white cliffs and headlands of the doomed land about midnight—the hour at which the news was spreading over France, as black, swift and terrible as night itself, that hope was dead, that the whole army had been captured at Sedan, and the Emperor himself made prisoner. All this, however, we did not learn until we landed in England, although I have no doubt that John Turner knew it when he gave us so sharp a warning.

The weather was favourable to us, and the ladies came on deck the next morning in a calm sea as we sped past the North Foreland between the Goodwin Lightships and the land. It was a lovely morning, and the sea all stripes of deep blue and green, and even yellow where the great sand banks of the Thames

estuary lay beneath the rippled surface.

Lucille thought but little of England, as she judged it from the tame bluffs of Thanet.

"Are these the famous white cliffs of England?" she said to the captain, for she rarely addressed herself unnecessarily to me. "Why they are but one quarter of the height of those of St. Valéry that I saw from the cabin window last night."

The captain, a simple man, sought to prove that England had counterbalancing advantages. He knew not that in certain humours a woman will find fault with anything. I thought that Mademoiselle took exception to the poor cliffs because they were those of my native land.

Madame proved more amenable to reason, however, and the captain, whose knowledge of French was not great, made an easier convert of her than of Lucille, who spoke English prettily enough, while her mother knew only the one tongue.

"There is bad weather coming," said the captain to me later in the day. "And I wish the tide served for Lowestoft harbour earlier than ten o'clock."

We anchored just astern of the coast-service gunboat, and a few hundred yards south of the pier at Lowestoft, awaiting the rise of the tide. At eleven o'clock we moved in, and passing through the dock into the river, anchored there for the night. I gave Madame the choice of passing the night on board and going ashore to the hotel, as it was too late to drive to Hopton. She elected to remain on board.

As ill fortune would have it, the evil weather foreseen by the captain came upon us in the night, and daylight next morning showed a grey and hopeless sea, with lowering clouds and a slantwise rain driving across all. The tide was low when the ladies came on deck, and the muddy banks of the river looked dismal enough, while the flat meadowland stretched away on all sides into a dim and mournful perspective of mist and rain.

The Hopton carriage was awaiting us at the landing-stage, and to those unaccustomed to such work the landing in a small boat no doubt presented difficulties and dangers of which we men took no account. The streets of Lowestoft were sloppy and half-deserted as we drove through them. A few fishermen in their oilskins seemed to emphasise the wetness and dismalness of England as they hurried down to the harbour in their great sea-boots. On the

uplands a fine drizzle veiled the landscape, and showed the gnarled and sparse trees to small advantage.

Lucille sat with close-pressed lips and looked out of the streaming windows. There were unshed tears in her eyes, and I grimly realised the futility of human effort. All my plans had been frustrated by a passing rain.

At home, however, I found all comfortable enough, and fires alight in the hall and principal rooms.

It was late in the day that I came upon Lucille alone in the drawing-room. She was looking out of the window across the bleak table-land to the sea.

"I am sorry, Mademoiselle," I said, suddenly conscious of the stiff bareness of my ancestral home, "that things are not brighter. I have done my best."

"Thank you," she said, and there was still resentment in her voice. "You have been very kind."

She stood for a few moments in silence, and then turning flashed an angry glance at me.

"I do not know who constituted you our protector," she said scornfully.

"Fate, Mademoiselle."

Chapter XVI

Exile

"Il y a donc des malheurs tellement bien cachés que ceux qui en sont la cause, ne les devinent même pas."

The first to show kindness to the ladies exiled at Hopton was Isabella Gayerson, who, in response to a letter from the rightful owner of the old manor house, called on Madame de Clericy. Isabella's pale face, her thin-lipped, determined mouth and reserved glance seem to have made no very favourable impression on Madame, who indeed wrote of her as a disappointed woman, nursing some sorrow or grievance in her heart.

With Lucille, however, Isabella speedily inaugurated a friendship, to which Lucille's knowledge of English no doubt contributed largely, for Isabella knew but little French.

"Lucille," wrote Madame to me, for I had returned to London in order to organise a more active pursuit of Charles Misté, "Lucille admires your friend Miss Gayerson immensely, and says that the English *demoiselles* suggest to her a fine and delicate porcelain—but it seems to me," Madame added, "that the grain is a hard one."

So rapid was the progress of this friendship that the two girls often met either at Hopton or at Little Corton, two miles away, where Isabella, now left an orphan, lived with an elderly aunt for her companion.

Girls, it would appear, possess a thousand topics of common interest, a hundred small matters of mutual confidence, which conduce to a greater intimacy than men and boys ever achieve. In a few weeks Lucille and Isabella were at Christian names, and sworn allies, though any knowing aught of them would have inclined to the suspicion that here, at all events, the confidences were not mutual, for Isabella Gayerson was a woman in a thousand in her power of keeping a discreet counsel. I, who have been intimate with her since childhood, can boast of no great knowledge to this day of her inward hopes, thoughts and desires.

The meetings, it would appear, took place more often at Hopton than in Isabella's home.

"I like Hopton," she said to Lucille one day, in her quiet and semi-indifferent way. "I have many pleasant associations in this house. The squire was always kind to me."

"And I suppose you played in these sleepy old rooms as a child," said Lucille, looking round at the portraits of dead and gone Howards, whose mistakes were now forgotten. "Yes."

Lucille waited, but the conversation seemed to end there naturally. Isabella had nothing more to tell of those bygone days. And, unlike other women, when she had nothing to say she remained silent.

"Did you know Mr. Howard's mother?" asked Lucille presently. "I have often wondered what sort of woman she must have been."

"I did not know her," was the answer, made more openly. It was only in respect to herself that Isabella cultivated reticence. It is so easy to be candid about one's neighbour's affairs. "Neither did he—it was a great misfortune."

"Is it not always a great misfortune?"

"Yes—but in this case especially so."

"How? What do you mean, Isabella?" asked Lucille, in her impulsive way. "You are so cold and reserved. Are all Englishwomen so? It is so difficult to drag things out of you."

"Because there is nothing to drag."

"Yes, there is. I want to know why it was such a special misfortune that Mr. Howard should never have known his mother. You may not be interested in him, but I am. My mother is so fond of him—my father trusted him."

"Ah!"

"There, again," cried Lucille, with a laugh of annoyance. "You say 'Ah!' and it means nothing. I look at your face and it says nothing. With us it is different—we have a hundred little exclamations—look at mother when she talks—but in England when you say 'Ah!' you seem to mean nothing.."

Lucille laughed and looked at Isabella, who only smiled.

"Well?"

"Well," answered Isabella, reluctantly, "if Mr. Howard's mother had lived he might have been a better man."

"You call him Mr. Howard," cried Lucille, darting into one of those side issues by which women so often reach their goal. "Do you call him so to his face?"

"No."

"What do you call him?" asked Lucille, with the persistence of a child on a trifle.

"Dick."

"And yet you do not like him?"

"I have never thought whether I like him or not—one does not think of such questions with people who are like one's own family."

"But surely," said Lucille, "one cannot like a person who is not good?"

"Of course not," answered the other, with her shadowy smile. "At least it is always so written in books."

"YOU SAY 'AH!' AND IT MEANS NOTHING. I LOOK AT YOUR FACE
AND IT SAYS NOTHING."

"YOU SAY 'AH!' AND IT MEANS NOTHING. I LOOK AT YOUR FACE AND IT SAYS
NOTHING."

After this qualified statement Isabella sat with her firm white hands clasped together in idleness on her lap. She was not a woman to fill in the hours with the trifling occupation of the work-basket, and yet was never aught but womanly in dress, manner, and, as I take it, thought. Lucille's fingers, on the contrary, were never still, and before she had lived at Hopton a fortnight she had half a dozen small protégées in the village for whom she fashioned little garments.

It was she who broke the short silence—her companion seemed to be waiting for that or for something else.

"Do you think," she asked, "that mother trusts Mr. Howard too much? She places implicit faith in all he says or does—just as my father did when he was alive."

Isabella—than whom none was more keenly alive to my many failings—paused before she answered, in her measured way:

"It all depends upon his motive in undertaking the management of your affairs."

"Oh—he is paid," said Lucille, rather hurriedly. "He is paid, of course."

"This house is his; the land, so far as you can see from any of the windows, is his also. He has affairs of his own to manage, which he neglects. A mere salary seems an insufficient motive for so deep an interest as he displays."

Lucille did not answer for some moments. Indeed, her needlework seemed at this moment to require careful attention.

"What other motive can he have?" she asked at length, indifferently.

"I do not understand the story of the large fortune that slipped so unaccountably through his fingers," murmured Isabella, and her hearer's face cleared suddenly.

"Alphonse Giraud's fortune?"

"Yes," said Isabella, looking at her companion with steady eyes, "Monsieur Giraud's fortune."

"It was stolen, as you know—for I have told you about it—by my father's secretary, Charles Miste."

"Yes; and Dick Howard says that he will recover it," laughed Isabella.

"Why not?"

"Why not, indeed? He will have good use for it. He has always been a spendthrift."

"What do you mean?" cried Lucille, laying down her work. "What can you mean, Isabella?"

"Nothing," replied the other, who had risen, and was standing by the mantelpiece looking down at the wood fire with one foot extended to its warmth. "Nothing—only I do not understand."

It would appear that Isabella's lack of comprehension took a more active form than that displayed in the conversation reported, *tant bien que mal*, from subsequent hearsay. Indeed, it has been my experience that when a woman fails

to comprehend a mystery—whether it be her own affair or not—it is rarely for the want of trying to sift it.

That Isabella Gayerson made further attempt to discover my motives in watching over Madame de Clericy and Lucille was rendered apparent to me not very long afterwards. It was, in fact, in the month of November, while Paris was still besieged, and rumours of Commune and Anarchy reached us in tranquil England, that I had the opportunity of returning in small part the hospitality of Alphonse Giraud.

Wounded and taken prisoner during the disastrous retreat upon the capital, my friend obtained after a time his release under promise to take no further part in the war, a promise the more freely given that his hurt was of such a nature that he could never hope to swing a sword in his right hand again.

This was forcibly brought home to me when I met Giraud at Charing Cross station, when he extended to me his left hand.

"The other I cannot offer you," he cried, "for a sausage-eating Uhlan, who smelt shockingly of smoke, cut the tendons of it."

He lifted the hand hidden in a black silk handkerchief worn as a sling, and swaggered along the platform with a military air and bearing far above his inches.

We dined together, and he passed that night in my rooms in London, where I had a spare bed. He evinced by his every word and action that spontaneous affection which he had bestowed upon me. We had, moreover, a merry evening, and only once, so far as I remember, did he look at me with a grave face.

"Dick," he then said, "can you lend me a thousand francs? I have not one sou."

"Nor I," was my reply. "But you can have a thousand francs."

"The Vicomtesse writes me that you are supplying them with money during the present standstill in France. How is that?" he said, putting the notes I gave him into his purse.

"I do not know," I answered; "but I seem to be able to borrow as much as I want. I am what you call in Jewry. I have mortgaged everything, and am not quite sure that I have not mortgaged you."

We talked very gravely of money, and doubtless displayed a vast ignorance of the subject. All that I can remember is, that we came to no decision, and laughingly concluded that we were both well sped down the slope of Avernus.

It had been arranged that we should go down to Hopton the following day, where Giraud was to pass a few weeks with the ladies in exile. And I thought—for Giraud was transparent as the day—that the wounded hand, the bronze of battle-field and camp, and the dangers lived through, aroused a hope that Lucille's heart might be touched. For myself, I felt that none of these were required, and was sure that Giraud's own good qualities had already won their way.

"She can, at all events, not laugh at this," he said, lifting the hurt member, "or ridicule our great charge. Oh, Dick, *mon ami*, you have missed something," he cried, to the astonishment of the porters in Liverpool Street station. "You have missed something in life, for you have never fought for France! Mon Dieu!—to hear the bugle sound the charge—to see the horses, those brave beasts, throw up their heads as they recognised the call—to see the faces of the men! Dick, that was life—real life! To hear at last the crash of the sabres all along the line, like a butler throwing his knife-box down the back stairs."

We reached Hopton in the evening, and I was not too well pleased to find that Isabella had been invited to dine, "to do honour," as Lucille said, to a "hero of the great retreat."

"We knew also," added Madame, addressing me, "that such old friends as Miss Gayerson and yourself would be glad to meet."

And Isabella gave me a queer smile.

During dinner the conversation was general and mostly carried on in English, in which tongue Alphonse Giraud discovered a wealth of humour. In the drawing-room I had an opportunity of speaking to Madame de Clericy of her affairs, to which report I also begged the attention of Lucille.

It appeared to me that there was in the atmosphere of my own home some subtle feeling of distrust or antagonism against myself, and once I thought I intercepted a glance of understanding exchanged by Lucille and Isabella. We were at the moment talking of Giraud's misfortunes, which, indeed, that stricken soldier bore with exemplary cheerfulness.

"What is," he asked, "the equivalent of our sou when that coin is used as the

symbol of penury?" and subsequently explained to Isabella with much vivacity that he had not a brass farthing in the world.

During the time that I spoke to Madame of her affairs, Alphonse and Isabella were engaged in a game of billiards in the hall, where stood the table; but their talk seemed of greater interest than the game, for I heard no sound of the balls.

The ladies retired early, Isabella passing the night at Hopton, and Alphonse and I were left alone with our cigars. In a few moments I was aware that the feeling of antagonism against myself had extended itself to Alphonse Giraud, who smoked in silence, and whose gaiety seemed suddenly to have left him. Not being of an expansive nature, I omitted to tax Giraud with coldness—a proceeding which would, no doubt, have been wise towards one so frank and open.

Instead I sat smoking glumly, and might have continued silent till bedtime had not a knocking at the door aroused us. The snow was lying thickly on the ground, and the flakes drove into the house when I opened the door, expecting to admit the coast guardsman, who often came for help or a messenger in times of shipwreck. It was, however, a lad who stood shaking himself in the hall—a telegraph messenger from Yarmouth, who, having walked the whole distance, demanded six shillings for his pains, and received ten, for it was an evil night.

I opened the envelope, and read that the message had been despatched that evening by the manager of a well-known London bank:

"Draft for five thousand pounds has been presented for acceptance—compelled to cash it to-morrow morning."

"Miste is astir at last," I said, handing the message to Giraud.



Chapter XVII

On the Track

"Le vrai moyen d'être trompé c'est de se croire plus fin que les autres."

I stole out of the house before daybreak the next morning, and riding to Yarmouth, took a very early and (with perhaps a subtle appropriateness) a very fishy train to London.

So ill equipped was I to contend with a financier of Mist's force that I did not even know the hour at which the London banks opened for business. A general idea, however, that half-past ten would make quite a long enough day for such work made me hope to be in time to frustrate or perchance to catch red-handed this clever miscreant.

The train was due to arrive at Liverpool Street station at ten o'clock, and ten minutes after that hour I stepped from a cab at the door of the great bank in Lombard Street.

"The manager," I said, hurriedly, to an individual in brass buttons and greased hair, whose presence in the building was evidently for a purely ornamental purpose. I was shown into a small glass room like a green-house, where sat two managers, as under a microscope—a living example of frock-coated respectability and industry to half a hundred clerks who were ever peeping that way as they turned the pages of their ledgers and circulated in an undertone the latest chop-house tale.

"Mr. Howard," said the manager, with his watch in his hand. "I was waiting for you."

"Have you cashed the draft?"

"Yes—at ten o'clock. The payee was waiting on the doorstep for us to open. The clerk delayed as long as possible, but we could not refuse payment. Hundred-pound notes as usual. Never trust a man who takes it in hundred-pound notes. Here are the numbers. As hard as you can to the Bank of England and stop them!

You may catch him there."

He pushed me out of the room, sending with me the impression that inside the frock-coat, behind the bland gold-rimmed spectacles, there was yet something left of manhood and that vague quality called fight, which is surely hard put to live long between four glass walls.

The cabman, who perhaps scented sport, was waiting for me though I had paid him, and as I drove along Lombard Street I thought affectionately of Miste's long thin neck, and wondered whether there would be room for the two of us in the Bank of England.

The high-born reader doubtless has money in the Funds, and knows without the advice of a penniless country squire that the approach to the Bank of England consists of a porch through which may be discerned a small courtyard. Opening on this yard are three doors, and that immediately opposite to the porch gives entrance to the department where gold and silver are exchanged for notes.

As I descended from the cab I looked through the porch, and there, across the courtyard, I saw the back of a man who was pushing his way through the swing doors. Charles Miste again! I paid the cabman, and noting the inches of the two porters in their gorgeous livery, reflected with some satisfaction that Monsieur Miste would have to reckon with three fairly heavy men before he got out of the courtyard.

There are two swing doors leading into the bank, and the man passing in there glanced back as he crossed the second threshold, giving me, however, naught but the momentary gleam of a white face. Arrived in the large room I looked quickly around it. Two men were changing money, a third bent over the table to sign a note. None of these could be Charles Miste. There was another exit leading to the body of the building.

"Has a gentleman passed through here?" I asked a clerk, whose occupation seemed to consist in piling sovereigns one upon another.

"Yes," he said, through his counting.

"Ah!" thought I. "Now I have him like a rat in a trap."

"He cannot get through?" I said.

"Can't he—you bet," said the young man with much humour.

I hurried on, and at last found the exit to Lothbury.

"Has a gentleman just passed out this way?" I inquired of a porter, who looked sleepy and dignified.

"Three have passed out this five minutes—old gent with a squint, belongs to Coutts's—tall fair man—tall dark man."

"The dark one is mine," I said. "Which way?"

"Turned to the left."

I hurried on with a mental note that sleepy men may see more than they appear to do. Standing on the crowded pavement of Lothbury, I realised that Madame de Clericy was right, and I little better than a fool. For it was evident that I had been tricked, and that quite easily by Charles Miste. To seek him in the throng of the city was futile, and an attempt predestined to failure. I went back, however, to the bank, and handed in the numbers of the stolen notes. Here again I learnt that to refuse payment was impossible, and that all I could hope was that each note changed would give me a clue as to the whereabouts of the thief. Each forward step in the matter showed me more plainly the difficulties of the task I had undertaken, and my own incapacity for such work. Nothing is so good for a man's vanity as contact with a clever scoundrel.

I resolved to engage the entire services of some one who, without being a professed thief-catcher, could at all events meet Charles Miste on his own slippery ground. With the help of the bank manager, I found one, named Sander, an accountant, who made an especial study of the shadier walks of finance, and this man set to work the same afternoon. It was his opinion that Miste had been confined in Paris by the siege, and had only just effected his escape, probably with one of the many permits obtained from the American Minister at this time by persons passing themselves as foreigners.

The same evening I received information from an official source that a man answering to my description of Miste had taken a ticket at Waterloo station for Southampton. The temptation was again too strong for one who had been brought up in an atmosphere and culture of sport. I set off by the mail train for Southampton, and amused myself by studying the faces of the passengers on the Jersey and Cherbourg boats. There was no sailing for Havre that night. At Radley's Hotel, where I had secured a room, I learnt that an old gentleman and lady with their daughter had arrived by the earlier train, and no one else. At the

railway station I could hear of none answering to my description.

If Charles Misté had entered the train at Waterloo station, he had disappeared in his shadowy way en route.

During the stirring months of the close of 1870, men awoke each morning with a certain glad expectancy. For myself—even in my declining years—the stir of events in the outer world and near at home is preferable to a life of that monotony which I am sure ages quickly those that live it. Circumstances over which I exercised but a nominal control—a description of human life it appears to me—had thrown my lot into close connection with France, that "light-hearted heroine of tragic story"; and at this time I watched with even a greater eagerness than other Englishmen the grim tragedy slowly working to its close in Paris.

It makes an old man of me to think that some of those who watched the stupendous events of '70 are now getting almost too old to preserve the keenest remembrance of their emotions, while many of the actors on that great stage have passed beyond earthly shame or glory. Keen enough is my own memory of the thrill with which I opened my newspaper, morning after morning, and read that Paris still held out.

Before quitting London, I had heard that the French had recaptured the small town of Le Bourget, in the neighborhood of Paris, and were holding it successfully against the Prussian attack. Telegraphic communication with Paris itself had long been suspended, and we, watchers on the hither side, only heard vague rumours of the doings within the ramparts. It appeared that each day saw an advance in the organisation of the defence. The distribution of food was now carried out with more system, and the defenders of the capital were confident alike of being able to repel assault and withstand a siege.

The Empress had long been in England, whither, indeed, she had fled, with the assistance of a worthy and courageous gentleman, her American dentist, within a few hours of our departure from Fécamp. The Emperor, a broken man bearing the seed of death, had been allowed to join her at Chislehurst, thus returning to the land where he had found asylum in his early adversity. It is strange how the Buonapartes, from the beginning to the close of their wondrous dynasty, had to deal with England.

The first of that great line died a captive to English arms, the last perished fighting our foes.

"Paris has not fallen yet, has it, sir?" the waiter asked me when he brought my breakfast on the following day—and I think the world talked of little else than Paris that rainy morning. For the siege had now lasted six weeks, and the ring of steel and iron was closing around the doomed city.

The London newspapers had not arrived, so the morning news was passed from mouth to mouth with that eagerness which is no respecter of persons. Strangers spoke to each other in the coffee-room, and no man hesitated to ask a question of his neighbour—the whole world seemed akin. In those days Southampton was the port of discharge for the Indian liners, and the hotel was full, every table being occupied. I looked over the bronzed faces of these administrators, by sword and pen, of our great empire, and soon decided that Charles Miste was not among them. The wisdom that cometh in the morning had, in fact, forced me to conclude that the search for the miscreant was better left in the hands of Mr. Sander and his professional assistants.

**"IT IS THE LADY WHO ARRIVED YESTERDAY," ANSWERED THE
WAITER.**

"IT IS THE LADY WHO ARRIVED YESTERDAY," ANSWERED THE WAITER.

At the breakfast table I received a telegram from Sander informing me that Paris still held out. He wired me this advice according to arrangement; for he had decided that Miste, feeling, like all Frenchmen, ill at ease abroad, was only awaiting the surrender to return to Paris, and there begin more active measures to realise his wealth. As soon, therefore, as the city fell I was to hasten thither and there meet Sander.

The arrival of my message occasioned a small stir in the room, and many keen glances were directed towards me as I read it. I handed it to my nearest neighbour, explaining that he in turn was at liberty to pass the paper on. It was not long before the waiter came to me with the request that he might make known to a young French lady travelling alone any news that would interest one of her nationality.

"Certainly," answered I. "Take the telegram to her that she may read it for herself."

"But, sir, she knows no English, and although I understand a little French, I cannot speak it."

"Then bring me the telegram, and point out to me the lady."

"It is the lady who arrived yesterday," answered the waiter. "She came, as I understand, with an old lady and gentleman, but they have left this morning for the Isle of Wight, and she remains alone."

He indicated the fair traveller, and I might have guessed her nationality from the fact that, unlike the Englishwomen present, she was breakfasting in her hat. She was a pretty woman—no longer quite young—with a pale oval face and deep brown hair. As I approached she, having breakfasted, was drawing her veil down over her face, and subsequently attended to her hat with pretty, studied movements of the hands and arms which were essentially French.

She returned my bow with quiet self-possession, and graciously looked to me to speak.

"The waiter tells me," I said in French, "that I am fortunate enough to possess some news which may be of interest to you."

"If it is news of France, Monsieur, I am *sur des épingles* until I hear it."

I laid the telegram before her, and she looked at it with a pretty shake of the head which wafted to me some faint and pleasant scent.

"Translate, if you please," she said. "I blush for an ignorance of which you might have spared me the confession."

It was a pretty profile that bent over the telegram, and I wished that I had arrived sooner, before she had lowered her veil. She followed my translation with a nod of the head, but did not raise her eyes.

"And this word?" pointing out the name of my agent with so keen an interest that she touched my hand with her gloved fingers. "This word 'Sander,' what is that?"

"That," I answered, "is the name of my agent, 'Sander,' the sender of the telegram."

"Ah—yes, and he is in London? Yes."

"And is he reliable?—excuse my pertinacity, Monsieur—you know, for a Frenchwoman—who has friends at the front—" she gave a little shiver. "Mon Dieu! it is killing."

She gave a momentary glance with wonderful eyes, which made me wish she would look up again. I wondered whom she had at the front.

"Yes, he is reliable," I answered. "You may take this news, Mademoiselle, as absolutely true."

And then, seeing that she was traveling alone, I made so bold as to place my poor services at her disposal. She answered very prettily, in a low voice, and declined with infinite tact. She had no reason, she said, at the moment to trespass on my valuable time, but if I would tell my name she would not fail to avail herself of my offer should occasion arise during her stay in England. I gave her my card, and as her attitude betokened dismissal, returned to my table, accompanied thither by the scowls of some of the young military gentlemen present.

Had I been a younger fellow, open to the fire of any dark eyes, I might have surrendered at discretion to the glance that accompanied her parting bow. As it was, I left her, desiring strongly that she might have need of my service. For reasons which the reader knows, all Frenchwomen were of special interest in my eyes, and this young lady wielded a strong and lively charm, to which I was fully alive so soon as she raised her deep eyes to mine.



Chapter XVIII

A Dark Horse

"Le plus grand art d'un habile homme est celui de savoir cacher son habileté."

Later in the day I was ignominiously recalled to London.

"Useless to remain in Southampton. First note has been changed in London," Sander telegraphed to me.

While lunching at the hotel, I learnt from the waiter that the young French lady had received letters causing her to change her plans, and that she had left hurriedly for Dover, the waiter thought.

Sander came to see me the same evening at my club in London.

"There are at least two in it—probably three," he said. "The note was changed at Cook's office, in the purchase of two tourist tickets to Baden-Baden, which can, of course, be resold or used in part only. It was done by an old man—wore a wig, they tell me—but he was genuine; not a young man in disguise, I mean."

If Mr. Sander knew more he did not take me further into his confidence. He was a pale-faced, slight man, having the outward appearance of a city clerk. But the fellow had a keen look, and there was something in the lines of his thin, determined lips that gave one confidence. I saw that he did not reciprocate this feeling. Indeed, I think he rather despised me for a thick-headed country bumpkin.

He glanced around the gorgeously decorated smoking-room of the club with a look half-contemptuous and half-envious, and sat restlessly in the luxurious arm-chair native to club smoking-rooms, as one cultivating a Spartan habit of life.

"It is probable," he said bluntly, "that you are being watched."

"Yes—I know the bailiffs keep their eye on me."

"I suppose you are not going away to shoot or anything like that?"

"I can go to France and look after Madame de Clericy's property," answered I, and the prospect of a change of scene was not unpleasant to me. For, to tell the truth, I was ill at ease at this time, and while in England fell victim to a weak and unmanly longing to be at Hopton. For, however strong a man's will may be, it seems that one woman in his path must have the power to inspire him with such a longing that he cannot free his mind of thoughts of her, nor interest himself in

any other part of the world but that which she inhabits. Thus, to a grey-haired man who surely might have been wiser, it was actual misery to be in England and not at Hopton, where Alphonse Giraud was no doubt happy enough in the neighbourhood of the woman we both loved.

**"IT IS PROBABLE," HE SAID BLUNTLY, "THAT YOU ARE BEING
WATCHED."**

"IT IS PROBABLE," HE SAID BLUNTLY, "THAT YOU ARE BEING WATCHED."

"Yes," said Sander to me, after long thought. "Do that. I shall get on better if you are out of England."

The man's air, as I have said, inspired confidence; and I, seeking an excuse to be moving, determined to obey him without delay. Moreover, I was beginning to realise more and more the difficulties of my task, and the remembrance of what had passed at Hopton made failure singularly distasteful.

The Vicomtesse had property in the Morbihan, to which I could penetrate without great risk of arrest. We had heard nothing from the agent in charge of this estate since the outbreak of war, and it seemed probable that the man had volunteered for active service in one of the Breton regiments, raised in all haste at this time.

Writing a note to Madame, I left England the next day, intending to be absent a week or ten days. My journey was uneventful, and needs not to be detailed here.

During the writer's absence in stricken France, Miss Isabella Gayerson, who seemed as restless as himself, suddenly bethought herself to open her London house and fill it with guests. It must be remembered that this lady was an heiress, and, if report be true, more than one needy nobleman offered her a title and that which he called his heart, only to meet with a cold refusal. I who know her so well can fancy that these disinterested gentlemen hesitated to repeat the experiment. It is vanity that too often makes a woman consent at last (though sometimes Love may awake and do it), and I think that Isabella was never vain.

"I have good reason to be without vanity," she once said in my hearing, but I do not know what she meant. The remark, as I remember, was made in answer to Lucille, who happened to say that a woman can dress well without being vain, and laughingly gave Isabella as an example.

Isabella's chief reason in coming to London during the winter was a kind one—namely, to put a temporary end to an imprisonment in the country which was

irksome to Lucille. And I make no doubt the two ladies were glad enough to avail themselves of this opportunity of seeing London. God made the country and men the towns, it is said; and I think they made them for the women.

On returning to London I found letters from Madame de Clericy explaining this change of residence, and in the same envelope a note from Isabella (her letters were always kinder than her speech), inviting me to stay in Hyde Park Street.

"We are sufficiently old friends," she wrote, "to allow thus of a general invitation, and if it shares the usual fate of such, the fault will be yours, and not mine."

The letter was awaiting me at the club, and I deemed it allowable to call in response the same afternoon. The news of Lucille's engagement to Alphonse Giraud was ever dangling before my eyes, and I wished to get the announcement swallowed without further suspense.

Alphonse, a perfect squire of dames, was engaged in dispensing thin bread and butter when I entered the room, feeling, as I feel to this day, somewhat out of place and heavy amid the delicate ornaments and flowers of a lady's drawing-room. My reception was not exactly warm, and I was struck by the pallor of Isabella's face, which, however, gave place to a more natural colour before long. Madame alone showed gladness at the sight of me, and held out both her hands in a welcome full of affection. I thought Lucille's black dress very becoming to her slim form.

We talked, of course, of the war, before which all other topics faded into insignificance at that time—and I had but disquieting news from France. The siege had now lasted seven weeks, and none knew what the end might be. The opportunity awaited the Frenchman, but none rose to meet it. France blundered on in the hands of political mediocrities, as she has done ever since.

I gathered that Alphonse was staying in the house, and wondered at the news, considering that Isabella knew him but slightly. It was the Vicomtesse who gave me the information, with one of her quiet glances that might mean much or nothing. For myself, I confess they usually possessed but small significance—men being of a denser (though perhaps deeper) comprehension than women, who catch on the wing a thought that flies past such as myself, and is lost.

I could only conclude that Isabella was seeking the happiness of her new-found friend in thus offering Giraud an opportunity, which he doubtless seized with

avidity.

Isabella was kind enough to repeat her invitation, which, however, I declined with Madame's eye upon me and Lucille's back suddenly turned in my direction. Lucille, in truth, was talking to Alphonse, and gaily enough. He had the power of amusing her, in which I was deficient, and she was always merry.

While we were thus engaged, a second visitor was announced, but I did not hear his name. His face was unknown to me—a narrow, foxy face it was—and the man's perfect self-assurance had something offensive in it, as all shams have. I did not care for his manner towards Isabella—which is, however, as I understand, quite *à la mode d'aujourd'hui*—a sort of careless, patronising admiration, with no touch of respect in it.

He made it quite apparent that he had come to see the young mistress of the house, and no one else, acknowledging the introductions to the remainder of the company with a scant courtesy. He talked to Isabella with a confidential inclination of his body towards her as they sat on low chairs with a small table between them, and it was easy to see that she appreciated the attention of this middle-aged man of the world.

"You see, Miss Gayerson," I heard him say with a bold glance, for he was one of those fine fellows who can look straight enough at a woman, but do not care to meet the eye of a man. "You see, I have taken you at your word. I wonder if you meant me to."

"I always mean what I say," answered Isabella; and I thought she glanced in my direction to see whether I was listening.

"A privilege of your sex—also to mean what you don't say."

At this moment Madame spoke to me, and I heard no more, but we may be sure that his further conversation was of a like intellectual and noteworthy standard. There was something in the man's lowered tone and insinuating manner that made me set him down as a lawyer.

"Do you notice," said Madame to me, "that Lucille is in better spirits?"

"Yes—I notice it with pleasure. Good spirits are for the young—and the old."

"I suppose you are right," said Madame. "Before the business of life begins, and after it is over."

Apropos of business, I gave the Vicomtesse at this time an account of my journey to Audierne, and was able to inform her that I had brought back money with me sufficient for her present wants.

While I was thus talking I heard, through my own speech, that Isabella invited the stranger to dine on the following Thursday.

"I have another engagement," he answered, consulting a small note-book. "But that can be conveniently forgotten."

Isabella seemed to like such exceedingly small social change, for she smiled brightly as he rose to take his leave.

To the Vicomtesse he paid a pretty little compliment in French, anticipating much enjoyment on the following Thursday in improving upon his slight acquaintance. He shook hands with me, his gaze fixed on my necktie. He then bowed to Lucille and Alphonse, who were talking together at the end of the room, and made a self-possessed exit.

"Who is your friend?" I asked Isabella bluntly, when the door was closed.

"A Mr. Devar. Does he interest you?"

There was something in Isabella's tone that betokened a readiness, or perhaps a desire, to fight Mr. Devar's battles. Had I been a woman, or wiser than I have ever proved myself, I should, no doubt, have ignored this challenge instead of promptly meeting it by my answer:

"I cannot say he does."

"You seem to object to him," she said sharply. "Please remember that he is a friend of mine."

"He cannot be one of long standing," I was foolish enough to answer. "For he is not an East Country man, and I never heard of him before."

"As a matter of fact," said Isabella, "I met him at a ball in town last week, and he asked permission to call."

I gave a short laugh, and Isabella looked at me with calm defiance in her eyes. It was, of course, no business of mine, which knowledge probably urged me on to further blunders.

Isabella's mental attitude was a puzzle to me. She was ready enough to supply information respecting Mr. Devar, whose progress towards intimacy had, to say the least of it, been rapid. But she supplied, as I thought, from a small store. She alternately allayed and aroused an anxiety which was natural enough in so old a friend, and to a man who had moved among adventurers nearly all his life. Alfred Gayerson, her brother and my earliest friend, was now in Vienna. Isabella had no one to advise her. She was, I suppose, a forerunner of the advanced young women of to-day, who, with a diminutive knowledge of the world culled from the imaginative writings of females as ignorant, are pleased to consider themselves competent to steer a clean course over the shoals of life.

Isabella had had, as I understood, a certain experience of the ordinary fortune-hunters of society—pleasant enough fellows, no doubt, but lacking self-respect and manhood—and it seemed extraordinary that her eyes should be closed to Mr. Devar's manifold qualifications to the title.

"Perhaps," she said at length, "you also will do us the pleasure of dining with us on Thursday, as you appear to be so deeply interested in Mr. Devar despite your assurances to the contrary."

"I shall be most happy to do so," answered I—ungraciously, I fear—and there arose a sudden light, almost of triumph, to her usually repressed glance.

Alphonse Giraud acceded to my suggestion that he should walk with me towards my club. His manner towards me had been reserved and unnatural, and I wished to get to the bottom of his feeling in respect to one whom he had always treated as a friend. Isabella was the only person to suggest an objection to my proposal, reminding Alphonse, rather pointedly, that he had but time to dress for dinner.

"Well," I said, when we were turning into Piccadilly, "Miste has begun to give us a scent at last."

"It is not so much in Monsieur Miste as in the money that I am interested," answered Giraud, swinging his cane, and looking about him with a simulated interest in his surroundings.

"Ah!"

"Yes; and I am beginning to be convinced that I shall never see either."

"Indeed."

"Let us quit an unpleasant subject," said the Frenchman, after a pause, and in the manner of one seeking to avoid an impending quarrel. "What splendid horses you have in England! See that pair in the victoria? one could not tell them apart. And what action!"

"Yes," I answered, lamely enough; "we have good enough horses."

And before I could return to the subject, which no longer drew us together, but separated us, he dragged out his watch and hurriedly turned back, leaving me with a foolish and inexplicable sense of guilt.



Chapter XIX

Sport

"L'amour du mieux t'aura interdit le bien."

"Do I look as if I had come out of Paris in a balloon?" said John Turner, in answer to my suggestion that he had made use of a method of escape at that time popular. "No, I left by the Creteil gate, without drum or trumpet, or anything more romantic than a *laissez-passer* signed by Favre. There will be the devil to pay in Paris before another week has passed, and I am not going to disburse."

"In what way will he want paying?" I asked.

"Well," answered John Turner, dragging at the knees of his trousers, which garments invariably incommoded his stout legs, "Well, the Government of National Defence is beginning to show that it has been ill-named. Before long they will be replaced by a Government of National Ruin. The ass in the streets is wanting to bray in the Hôtel de Ville, and will get there before he has finished."

"You are well out of it," said I, "and do not seem to have suffered by the siege."

"Next to being a soldier it is good to be a banker in time of war," said Turner, pulling down his waistcoat, which, indeed, had been in no way affected by the privations currently reported to be the lot of the besieged Parisians.

"What about Miste?" he added, abruptly.

"I have seen his back again, I do not believe the man has a face."

And I told my astute friend of my failure to catch Charles Miste at the Bank of England.

"Truth is," commented the banker, "that Monsieur Miste is an uncommonly smart rogue. You must be careful—when he does show you his face, have a care. And if you take my advice you will leave this little business to the men who know what they are about. It is not every one who knows the way to tackle a fellow carrying a loaded revolver. By the way, do you carry such a thing yourself?"

"Never had one in my life."

"Then buy one," said Turner. "I always wear one—in a pocket at the back, where neither I nor any one else can get at it. Sorry you could not come to luncheon," he continued. "I wanted to have a long talk with you."

He settled himself in the large arm-chair, which he completely filled. I like a man to be bulky in his advancing years.

"WAITER, TAKE THIS GENTLEMAN'S ORDER. YOU YOUNG FELLOWS CANNOT SMOKE WITHOUT DRINKING, NOWADAYS—HORRID BAD HABIT. WAITER, BRING ME THE SAME."

"WAITER, TAKE THIS GENTLEMAN'S ORDER. YOU YOUNG FELLOWS CANNOT SMOKE WITHOUT DRINKING, NOWADAYS—HORRID BAD HABIT. WAITER, BRING ME THE SAME."

"Take that chair," he said, "and this cigar. I suppose you want something to drink. Waiter, take this gentleman's order. You young fellows cannot smoke without drinking, nowadays—horrid bad habit. Waiter, bring me the same."

When we were alone, John Turner sat smoking and looking at me with beady, reflective eyes.

"You know, Dick," he said at length, "I have got you down in my will."

"Thanks—but you will last my time."

"Then it is no good, you think?" he inquired, with a chuckle.

"Not much."

"You want it now?" he suggested.

"No."

"Your father's son," commented my father's friend. "Stubborn and rude. A true Howard of Hopton. I have got you down in my will, however, and I'm going to interfere in your affairs. That is why I sent for you."

I smoked and waited.

"I take it," he went on in his short and breathless way, "that things are at a standstill somewhat in this position. If you marry Isabella Gayerson, you will have with her money, which is a tidy fortune, four thousand a year. If you don't

have the young woman, you can live at Hopton, but without a sou to your name. You want to marry Mademoiselle, who thinks you are too old and too big a scoundrel. That is Mademoiselle's business. Giraud junior is also in love with Mademoiselle Lucille, who would doubtless marry him if he had the wherewithal. In the mean time she is coy—awaiting the result of your search. You are seeking Giraud's money, so that he may marry Mademoiselle of the bright eyes—you understand that, I suppose?"

"Thoroughly."

"That is all right. It is best to have these affairs clearly stated. Now, why the devil do you not ask Isabella to marry you—"

"To begin with, she would not have me," I interrupted.

"Nice girl, capable of a deep and passionate affection—I know these quiet women—two thousand five hundred a year."

"She wouldn't have me."

"Then ask her, and when she has refused you, fight the validity of your father's will."

"But she might not refuse me," said I. "She hates me, though! I know that. There is no one on earth with such a keen scent for my faults."

"Ye-es," said Turner slowly. "Well?"

"She might think it her duty to accept me on account of the will."

"Have you ever known a woman weigh duty against the inclination of her own heart?"

"I know little about women," replied I, "and doubt whether you know more."

"That is as may be. And you wouldn't marry Isabella for two thousand a year?"

"Not for twenty thousand," replied I, half in my wineglass.

"Virtuous young man! Why?"

I looked at Turner and laughed.

"A slip of a French girl," he muttered contemptuously. "No bigger round than the

calf of my leg."

And I suppose he only spoke the truth.

He continued thus to give me much good advice, to which, no doubt, had I been prudent, I should have listened with entire faith. But my friend, like other worldly wiseacres, had many theories which he himself failed to put into practice. And as he spoke there was a twinkle in his eye, and a tone of scepticism in his voice, as if he knew that he was but whistling to the wind.

Then John Turner fell to abusing Misté and Giraud and the late poor Vicomte as a parcel of knaves and fools.

"Here am I," he cried, "with a bundle of my signatures being hawked about the world by a thief, and cannot stop one of them. Every one knows that my paper is good; the drafts will be negotiated from pillar to post like a Bank of England note, and the account will not be closed for years."

It was a vexatious matter for so distinguished a banker to be mixed in, and I could give him but little comfort. While I was still with him, however, a letter was brought to me which enlightened us somewhat. This communication was from my agent Sander, and bore the Brussels postmark.

"This Misté," he wrote, "is no ordinary scoundrel, but one who will want most careful treatment, or we shall lose the whole amount. I have now arrived at the conclusion that he has two accomplices, and one of these in London; for I am undoubtedly watched, and my movements are probably reported to Misté. Yourself and Monsieur Giraud are doubtless under surveillance also. I am always on Misté's heels, but never catch him up. It seems quite clear, from the inconsequence of his movements, that he is endeavouring to meet an accomplice, but that my presence so close upon his heels repeatedly scares them apart. He receives letters and telegrams at the Poste Restante, under the name of Marcel. So close was I upon his track, that at Bruges I caused him to break his appointment by a few hours only. He sent off a telegram, and made himself scarce only two hours before my arrival. This is a large affair, and we must have great patience. In the mean time, I think it probable that Misté will not endeavour to cash any more drafts. He only wants sufficient for current expenses, and will probably endeavour to negotiate the whole amount to some small foreign government in guise of a loan."

"That is what he will do," affirmed John Turner. "Persia or China of a needy

South American state."

It pleased me at times to think that I could guess Lucille's thoughts, and indeed she made it plain at this time that she cherished some grudge against me. It was, I suppose, only natural that she should suspect me of lukewarmness in a search which, if successful, would inevitably militate to my own discomfiture. Alphonse Giraud was doubtless awaiting, with a half-concealed impatience, the moment when he might honourably press his suit. Thus, Charles Miste held us all in the hollow of his hand, and the news I had received was as important to others as to myself.

I therefore hurried to Hyde Park Street, and had the good fortune to find all the party within. I made known the contents of Sander's letter, adding thereto, for the benefit of the ladies, John Turner's comments and my own suspicions.

"We shall catch him yet!" cried Alphonse, forgetting in the excitement of the moment the dignified reserve which had of late stood between us. "Bravo, Howard! we shall catch him yet."

He wrung my hand effusively, and then, remembering himself, glanced at Isabella, as I thought, and lapsed into attentive and suspicious silence.

Having made my report I withdrew, and at the corner of the street was nearly run over by a private hansom cab, at that time a fashionable vehicle among men about town. I caught a glimpse of a courteous gloved hand, and Mr. Devar's face wreathed in the pleasantest of smiles.

"You omitted to tell me at what hour you dine," was the remark with which Mr. Devar made his entrance. He refused to accept a chair, and took his stand on the hearth-rug without monopolising the fire, and with perfect ease and a word for every one.

"As I drove here I passed your friend Mr. Howard," he said presently, and Isabella said "Ah!"

"Yes, and he looked somewhat absorbed."

Mr. Devar waited, and after a pause, kindly continued to interest himself in so unworthy a subject.

"Did you not tell me," he remarked, "that Mr. Howard is engaged on some—er—quixotic enterprise—the search for a fortune he has lost?"

"The fortune is Monsieur Giraud's," said the lady of the house.

Devar turned to Alphonse with a bow appropriately French.

"Then I congratulate Monsieur on his—possibilities."

His manner of speech was suggestive of a desire to conceal a glibness which is usually accounted a fault.

"And I hope that Mr. Howard's obvious absorption was not due to—discouragement."

"On the contrary," answered Isabella, "Mr. Howard has just given us a most hopeful report."

"Has he caught the thief?"

"No; but his agent, a Mr. Sander, writes from Brussels that he has traced the thief to the Netherlands, and there seems to be some probability that he will be taken."

"My experience of thieves," said Mr. Devar airily, "has been small. But I imagine they are hard to take when they once get away. Mr. Howard is, I fear, wasting his time."

Isabella answered nothing to this, though her pinched lips seemed to indicate a doubt whether such a waste was in reality going forward.

"Our neighbour's enterprise usually appears to be a waste of time, does it not?" he said, with the large tolerance of a man owing to many failings.

Alphonse shrugged his shoulders and spread out his hands with a gesture of helplessness, further accentuated by the bandage on his wrist.

"I do not so much want to catch the thief as to possess myself of the money," he said.

"You are charitable, Monsieur Giraud."

"No—I am poor."

Devar laughed in the pleasantest manner imaginable.

"And of course," he said, indicating the Frenchman's maimed hand, which was usually in evidence, "you are unable to undertake the search yourself?"

"As yet."

"Then you intend ultimately to join in the chase—you are a great sportsman, I hear?"

The graceful compliment was not lost upon Alphonse, who beamed upon his interlocutor.

"In a small way—in a small way," he answered. "Yes, when they strike a really good scent I shall follow, wounds or no wounds."

At this Mr. Devar expressed some concern, and made himself additionally agreeable. He refused still to be seated, saying that he had but come to ascertain the dinner hour on the following Thursday. Nevertheless, he prolonged his stay and made himself vastly fascinating.



Chapter XX

Underhand

"Le doute empoisonne tout et ne tue rien."

As I walked through the park towards Isabella's house on the evening of the dinner-party, Devar's hansom cab dashed past me and stopped a few yards farther on. The man must have had sharp eyes to recognise me in a London haze on a November evening. Devar leapt from his cab and came towards me.

"Shall I walk with you or will you drive with me?" he said.

Placed between two evil alternatives, I suggested that it would be better for his health to walk with me—hoping, although it was a dry night, that his shiny boots were too precious or tight for such exercise. Mr. Devar, however, made a sign to the groom to follow, and slipped his hand engagingly within my arm.

"Glad of the chance of a walk," he said. "Wish I was a free man like you, Howard, London would not often see me!"

"What would?" I asked, for I like to know where vermin harbours.

"Ah!"—he paused, and, as I thought, glanced at me. "The wide world. Should like, for instance, a roving commission such as yours—to look for a scoundrel with a lot of money-bags, who may be in London or Timbuctoo."

I walked on in silence, never having had quick speech or the habit of unburthening my soul to the first listener.

"Not likely to stay in London in November if he is a man of sense as well as enterprise," he added, jerking up the fur collar of his coat.

We walked on a little farther.

"Suppose you have no notion where he is?" said my bland companion, to which I made no articulate reply.

"Do you know?" he asked at length, as one in a corner.

"Do you *want* to know?" retorted I.

"Oh—no," with a laugh.

"That is well," said I finally. And we walked on for a space in silence, when my companion changed the conversation with that ease of manner under the direct snub which only comes from experience. Mr. Devar was certainly a good-natured person, for he forgave my rudeness as soon as it was uttered.

I know not exactly how he compassed it, but he restored peace so effectually that before we reached Hyde Park Street he had forced me to invite him to lunch with me at my club on the following Saturday. This world is certainly for the thick-skinned.

We entered Isabella's drawing-room, therefore, together, and a picture of brotherly love.

"Force of good example," explained Mr. Devar airily. "I saw Howard walking and walked with him."

There were assembled the house-party only, Devar and I being the guests of the evening. Isabella frowned as we entered together. I wondered why.

Devar attached himself to Alphonse Giraud, whom he led aside under pretext of examining a picture.

"Monsieur Giraud," he then said to him in French, "as a man of affairs I cannot but deplore your heedlessness."

He was a much older man than Giraud, and had besides the gift of uttering an impertinence as if under compulsion.

"But, my dear sir—" exclaimed Alphonse.

"Either you do not heed the loss of your fortune or you are blind."

"You mean that I cannot trust my friend," said Alphonse.

Mr. Devar spread out his hands in denial of any such meaning.

"Monsieur Giraud," he said, "I am a man of the world, and also a lawyer. I suppose I am as charitable as my neighbours. But it is never wise to trust a single man with a large sum of money. None of us knows his own weakness. Put not thy neighbour into temptation."

Which sounded like Scripture, and doubtless passed as such. Mr. Devar nodded easily, smiled like an advertisement of dentifrice, and moved back to the centre of the room. It naturally fell to him to offer his arm to the hostess, while Madame accompanied me to the dining-room. Alphonse and Lucille paired off, as it seemed to me, very naturally.

As we passed down the stairs I fell into thought, and made a mental survey of all these people as they stood in respect to myself. Alphonse had progressed, as was visible on his telltale face, from suspicion to something near hostility. Isabella—always a puzzle—was more enigmatic than ever; for she showed herself keenly alive to my faults, and made no concealment of her distrust, though she threw open her house to me with a persistent and almost anxious hospitality. Here was no friend. Had I, in Isabella, an enemy? Of Devar, all that I could conclude was that he was suspicious. His interest in myself was less gratifying than the deepest indifference. In Madame de Clericy I had one who wished to be my friend, but her attitude towards me was inscrutable. She seemed to encourage Alphonse. Did she, like the rest of them, suspect me of seeking to frustrate his suit by withholding his fortune? She merely looked at me, and would say no word. And of Lucille, what could I think but that she hated me?

At dinner we spoke of the siege, and of those sad affairs of France which drew all men's thoughts at this time. Mr. Devar was, I remember, well informed on the points of the campaign, and seemed to talk of them with equal facility in French and English; but I disliked the man, and determined to make my thoughts known to Isabella.

It was no easy matter to outstay Mr. Devar, but, asserting my position as an old friend, this was at last accomplished. When we were left alone, Alphonse must have divined my intention in the quick way that was natural to him; for he engaged Lucille and her mother in a discussion of the latest news, which he translated from an evening paper. Indeed, Lucille and he put their heads together over the journal, and seemed to find it damnably amusing.

"Isabella," I said, "will you allow me to make some inquiries concerning this man Devar before you ask him to your house again?"

"Are you afraid that Mr. Devar will interfere with your own private schemes?" she replied, in that tone of semi-banter which she often assumed towards me when we were alone.

"Thanks—no. I am quite capable of taking care of myself, so far as Mr. Devar is concerned. It is—if you will believe it—in regard to yourself that I have misgivings. I look upon myself as in some sort your protector."

She looked at me, and gave a sudden laugh.

"A most noble and competent protector!" she said, in her biting way, "when you are always fortune-hunting, or else in France taking care of beauty in distress."

She glanced across the room towards Lucille in a manner strangely cold.

"Why do you encourage this man?" I asked, returning to the subject from which Isabella had so easily glided away. "He is not a gentleman. Seems to me the man is a—dark horse!"

"Well, you ought to know," said Isabella, with a promptness which made me reflect that I was no match for the veriest schoolgirl in a warfare of words.

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"I did not understand," continued Isabella, looking at me under her lashes, "that you looked upon yourself as my protector. It is rather an amusing thought!"

"Oh! I do not pretend to competence," answered I; "I know you to be cleverer, and quite capable of managing your own affairs. If there was anything you wanted, no doubt you could get it better without my assistance than with it."

"No doubt," put in Isabella, with a queer curtness.

"But my father looked upon you rather in the light I mentioned. He was very fond of you, and thought much of your welfare, and—"

"You think the burden should be hereditary," she interrupted again, but she smiled in a manner that softened the acerbity of her words.

"No, Dick," she said, "you are better at your fortune-hunting."

"It is not for myself," I said too hurriedly; for Isabella had always the power to make me utter hasty words, involving me in some quarrel in which I invariably

fared badly.

"Who knows?"

"You think that if the fortune fell into my hands, the temptation would be too strong for a poor man like myself?" I inquired.

"Poor by choice!" The words were hardly audible, for Isabella was busying her fingers with some books that lay on the table between us. It may have been the effect of the lamp shade, but I thought her colour heightened when I glanced at her face.

"It is hard to believe that you are honestly seeking a fortune, which, when found, will enable another man to marry Lucille," she said significantly, without looking at me. And I suppose she knew that which was in my heart.

"Some day," I retorted, "you will have to apologise for having said that!"

"Then others will need to do the same! Lucille herself does not believe in you."

"Yes," I answered, "others will have to do the same, and thank you for it."

"Lucille will not," answered Isabella, with a note of triumph in her voice, "for she had reason to distrust you in Paris."

"You seem to be on very confidential terms with Mademoiselle."

"Yes," she answered, looking at me with quiet defiance.

"Is the confidence mutual, Isabella?" asked I, rising to go; and received no answer.

When I bade good-night to Madame de Clericy, she was standing alone at the far end of the room.

"Ah! mon ami," she said, as she gave me her hand, "I think you are blinder than other men. Women are not only clothes. We have feelings of our own, which spring up without the help of any man—in despite of any, perhaps—remember that."

Which I confess was Greek to me, and sent me on my way with the feeling of a hunter who, in following one all-absorbing quarry through the forest, and hearing on all sides a suppressed rustle or hushed movement, pauses to wonder whence they come and what they mean.

"Tell me," said Alphonse, who helped me with my heavy coat, "if you have news of Miste or propose to follow him. I will accompany you."

He said it awkwardly, after the manner of one avowing an unworthy suspicion of which he is ashamed. So Alphonse Giraud was to follow me and watch my every movement, treating me like a servant unworthy of trust. I made answer, promising to advise him of any such intention; for Giraud's company was pleasant under any circumstances, and there would be some keen sport in running Miste to earth with him beside me.

Thus I came away from Isabella's house with the conviction that she and no other was my most active enemy. It was Isabella who had poisoned Giraud's mind against me. He was too simple and honest to have conceived unaided such thoughts as he now harboured. Moreover, he was, like many good-hearted people, at the mercy of every wind that blows, and, like the chameleon, took his colour from his environments.

It was to no other than Isabella that I owed Lucille's coldness, and I shrewdly suspected some ulterior motive in the action that transferred the home of the distressed ladies—for a time at least—from my house at Hopton to her own house in London. Madame de Clericy and Lucille were no longer my guests, but hers; and each day diminished their debt towards me and made them more beholden to Isabella.

"I know," Lucille had said to me one day, "that you despise us for being happier in London than at Hopton; we are conscious of your contempt."

And with a laugh she linked arms with Madame de Clericy, who hastened to say that Hopton was no doubt charming in the spring.

I had long ago discovered that Lucille ruled her mother's heart, where, indeed, no other interest entered. This visit to Isabella's town house had, it appears, been arranged by the two girls, Madame acquiescing, as she acquiesced in all that was for her daughter's happiness.

In whatsoever line I moved, Isabella seemed to stand in my path ready to frustrate my designs and impede my progress. And Isabella Gayerson had been my only playmate in childhood—the companion of my youth, and, if the matter had rested with me, might have remained the friend of my whole lifetime.

As I walked down Oxford Street (for in those days I could not afford a cab, my

every shilling being needed to keep open Hopton and pay the servants there) I pondered over these things, and quite failed to elucidate them. And writing now, after many stormy years, and in quiet harbour at Hopton, I still fail to understand Isabella; nor can I tell what it is that makes a woman so uncertain in her friendships.

Then my thoughts returned to Mr. Devar, where the necessity for action presented difficulties more after my own heart.

I went to the club and there wrote a letter to Sander, who was still in the Netherlands, asking him if he knew aught of a gentleman calling himself Devar, who appeared to me to be no gentleman, who spoke French like any Frenchman, and had the air of a prosperous scoundrel.

Chapter XXI

Checkmate

"L'honneur n'existe que pour ceux qui ont de l'honneur."

Two or three days later I received a telegram from Sander, couched in the abrupt language affected by that keen-witted individual:

"Ask John Turner if he knows Devar."

The great banker's affairs were at this time of such moment that it seemed inconsiderate to trouble him with my difficulties. Also I was beginning to learn a lesson which has since been more fully impressed on my mind—namely, that there is only one person whose interest in one's affairs is continuous and sincere—namely, one's self. John Turner was a kind friend, and one who, I believe, bestowed a great affection upon a very unworthy object; but at such a time, when France seemed to be crumbling away in the sight of men, it was surely asking too much that I should expect him to turn his thoughts to me. I called, however, at the hotel where he had established himself, and there learnt from his valet that my friend was in the habit of quitting his temporary abode early in the day, not to return until evening.

"Where does he lunch?" I asked.

"Sometimes at one place, sometimes at another—wherever they have a good *chef*, sir," the man replied.

I bethought me of my own club and its renown. Come peace or war, I knew that John Turner never missed his meals. I left a note asking him to take luncheon with me at the club on the following day, to discuss matters of importance and meet a mutual acquaintance. I invited him fifteen minutes later than the hour named to Mr. Devar, and in the evening received his acceptance. As I was walking down St. James Street the next morning I met Alphonse Giraud.

"Will you lunch with me at the club," I said, "to-day, at one. I want to give you every facility to carry out your scheme to keep an eye on me."

Poor Alphonse blushed and hung his head.

"John Turner will be there," I said, with a laugh, "and perhaps we may hear something that will interest you—at all events, he will talk of money, since you are so absorbed in it."

So my luncheon party formed itself into a rather queer *partie carrée*; for I knew John Turner's contempt for Alphonse, and hoped that he might cherish a yet stronger feeling against Devar.

At the hour appointed that gentleman arrived, and was pleased to be very gracious and patronising. His manner towards me was that of a man of the world who is kindly disposed towards a country bumpkin. I received him in the smaller smoking-room, where we were alone, and were still sitting there when Alphonse came. It was quite evident that the little Frenchman appreciated the great English club.

"Now, in Paris," he said, "we copy all this. But it is not the same thing. We have our clubs, but they are quite different—they are but cafés—and why?"

He looked at us in the deepest distress.

"Because," I suggested, "you are by nature too sociable. Frenchman cannot meet without being polite to each other, so the independence of a club is lost. Englishmen can share a cabin, and still be distant."

"The furniture is the same," said Giraud, looking round with a reflective eye, "but there is a different feeling in the air. It is different from the Paris clubs. Do you know Paris, Monsieur Devar?" Devar paused.

"Of course, I have been there," he replied, looking at the carpet. "What Englishman has not?"

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"MR. DEVAR," REPEATED TURNER, "LET ME DRAW YOUR ATTENTION TO THE DOOR!"

And he was still saying pleasant things of the capital, when the button-boy brought me John Turner's card. I told him to bring the gentleman upstairs, and remember still the odd feeling in the throat with which I heard Turner's step.

The door was thrown open. The boy announced Mr. John Turner, and for a brief moment Devar's eye meeting mine told me that I had another enemy in the world. The man's face was mottled, and he sat quite still. I rose and shook hands with John Turner, who had not yet recovered his breath. Alphonse—ever polite and affable—did the same. Then I turned and said:

"Let me introduce to you Mr. Devar—Mr. John Turner."

Turner's face, at no time expressive, did not change.

"Ah!" he said, slowly—"Mr. Devar of Paris."

There was a short silence, during which the two men looked at each other, and Alphonse shuffled from one foot to the other in an intense desire to keep things pleasant and friendly in circumstances dimly adverse.

"Mr. Devar," repeated Turner, "let me draw your attention to the door!"

There was nothing dramatic about my old friend. He never forgot his stoutness, and always carried it with dignity. He merely jerked his thumb towards the door by which he had entered.

Devar must have known Turner better than I did. Perhaps he knew the sterner side of a character of which I had only experienced the kindness and friendship, for he stood with a white face, and never looked at Giraud or myself. Then he shrugged his shoulders and walked slowly towards the door, his face wearing the sickly smile of the vanquished.

"Is that what you invited me for?" asked my old friend, when the door had closed behind Devar.

"Partly."

"But I suppose we are to have some luncheon?"

"Yes; there is some luncheon."

"Then let us go to it," said Turner, with his watch in his hand. But before we had reached the door, Alphonse had placed himself in Turner's way, looking as tall as he could.

"Mr. Devar is my friend," he cried, with a dramatic gesture and a fierce snatch at that side of his mustache which invariably failed him at crucial moments.

"Then, my dear Giraud," said Turner, laying his fatherly hand on the Frenchman's shoulder, "say nothing about it. It is no matter for pride. Devar was once my clerk, and would now be doing penal servitude if I had not let him off. Shall we go to luncheon?"

But Alphonse was not to be mollified, and during a meal, of which Turner duly appreciated the merits, concealed his annoyance with a tact truly French. He was a little more formal in his speech—a little more ceremonious in manner, and John Turner ignored these signs with a placid assurance for which I was grateful.

"Where did you pick up Devar?" asked the banker, when the edge of his appetite had been blunted by cold game pie.

"He picked me up," answered I; and went on to explain how this gentleman had forced himself upon us, and how Sander had given me a plain hint how to rid myself of him.

"Of course," said John Turner, "he is in league with Miste, and has been keeping him informed of your movements. If you see Devar again, kick him. I had that pleasure myself once, but I'm afraid you will never get the chance. The man has had a finger in every Anglo-French swindle of the last ten years. He dares not show his face in Paris."

We continued to talk of Mr. Devar and his liabilities, of which the least seemed to be the risk of a kicking from myself. The man had, it appeared, sailed too near the wind of fraud on several occasions, and John Turner held him in the hollow of his hand.

Alphonse, however, was not to be appeased. His honour had, as he imagined, been assailed by this insult to one upon whom he had bestowed his friendship, and he took no part in our talk when it was of Devar.

Turner did not stay long after we had finished our wine.

"No," he said, "if I do not keep moving I shall go to sleep."

When he had left us, Alphonse showed a restlessness which soon culminated in departure, and I sat down to write to Sander. The rapid exit (which ultimately proved to be as complete as it was sudden) of Mr. Devar could not fail to have some bearing on the quest in which Sander was engaged, and I now recapitulated in mind many suspicious incidents connected with the well-dressed adventurer who had so easily found an entrée to Isabella's house.

Alphonse went, as I later learnt, straight to Hyde Park Street, and found Isabella alone. For Madame de Clericy and Lucille were regular in their attendance at a neighbouring Roman Catholic Church, whither many Frenchwomen resorted at this time to pray for their friends and country.

"Howard," said Alphonse, "has grossly insulted Mr. Devar. In my country such an incident would not pass without bloodshed."

And he related, with considerable fire, the scene in the smoking-room at the club.

"But it was Mr. Turner and not Dick who insulted Mr. Devar."

"That is true, but Howard planned the whole—it was a trick, a trap."

"A clever trap," said Isabella, with her incomprehensible smile. "I did not know that Dick had the wit."

"Mr. Turner appears to have known Devar before," explained Alphonse, "and seemed to have some cause for complaint against him, though I do not believe all he said. And now Howard wantonly insults one of your friends, a gentleman who has dined in this house. He takes too much upon himself. If you will only say the word, Miss Gayerson, I will quarrel with Howard myself."

And Isabella, as Alphonse subsequently told me, received this offer with an ill-concealed smile.

"Dick is not afraid of the responsibility," she said, and did not appear so resentful as her champion.

"But why did he do it?"

Isabella did not answer at once, and Alphonse, whose good heart invariably tricked his temper, made a suggestion.

"Is it because he thought Mr. Devar no fit friend for yourself, Miss Gayerson?"

Isabella laughed derisively before she did me another wrong.

"He does not trouble about me or my affairs," she answered. "No, it is because Mr. Devar is too clever a person to be a welcome observer of Dick's actions. Dick probably knows that Mr. Devar is an expert in money matters, and less easy to deceive than yourself and a few ignorant and trusting women."

"You mean in the matter of my fortune?"

"Yes," replied the friend of my childhood. "It is probable that Mr. Devar suspects what others suspect. But you are so simple, Monsieur Giraud!"

Alphonse shrugged his shoulders.

"It is not that—Mademoiselle," he said with his light laugh. "It is that I am a fool."

Isabella was not looking at him, but at her quiet hands clasped together on her lap.

"We all know," she said, "that Dick is supplying Madame de Clericy with money that does not come from her estates. Whence does it come?"

"You suggest," said Alphonse, "that Howard has recovered my money and is supporting Madame de Clericy and Lucille with it."

What answer Isabella would have made to this I know not, for it was at this moment that the servant threw open the door and ushered me into a silence which was significant even to one of no very quick understanding. I saw that Alphonse Giraud was agitated and caught a singular gleam in Isabella's eyes. I suppose she was one of those women who take pleasure in stirring up strife between men. Her cheeks had a faint pink flush on them that made her suddenly beautiful. I had never noticed her looks before.

It was Alphonse who spoke first.

"There are several points, Monsieur," he said, angrily, "upon which I demand an explanation."

"All right—but I am not going to quarrel with you, Giraud."

I looked very straight at Isabella, whose eyes, however, did not fall under mine.

But I think she knew that I blamed her for this.

"You have insulted a friend of Miss Gayerson's."

"A matter," was my reply, "which rests between Miss Gayerson and myself. I have rid her house of a scoundrel—that is all."

I thought Isabella was going to speak, but she closed her pale lips again and glanced at Alphonse.

"You have been supplying Madame de Clericy with money during the last six months?" said he.—"Yes."

"Your own money?"—"Most certainly"—and I was soft-hearted enough to omit reminding him that he owed me a thousand francs.

"You have repeatedly told me," pursued Alphonse, who seemed to be nursing his anger into an artificial life, "that you are penniless. Whence comes this money?"

"I borrowed it."

"And if Madame de Clericy fails to repay you, you will be ruined?"

"Precisely."

"And you ask me to believe that," laughed Giraud, scornfully.

"No," answered I, going towards the door, for my temper was rising, and there remained but that way of avoiding a quarrel. "You may do as you like."

As I turned to close the door I caught sight of Isabella's face, and it wore a look that took me back to school holidays, when she and I wandered in the Hopton woods together, and were, I dare say, sentimental enough.



Chapter XXII

Home

"Les plus généreux sont toujours ceux qui n'ont rien."

The events in France, stupendous in themselves, seemed to have shaken the nerves of nations. That great sleeping Bear of the North roused itself, and in its clumsy awakening put a heavy paw through the Treaty of Paris. The Americans—our brothers in thought, speech and energetic purpose—raised a great cry against us in that we had allowed the ill-fated Alabama to leave our shores equipped for destruction. There was a spirit of strife and contention in the atmosphere of the world. Friendly nations nursed an imaginary grievance against their neighbours, and those that had one brought it out, as a skeleton from a cupboard, and inspected it in public.

In a school playground the rumour of a fight stirs latent passions, and doubles many a peaceful fist. France and Prussia, grasping each other by the throat, seemed to have caused such an electric disturbance in the atmosphere of Europe, and many Englishmen were for fighting some one—they did not care whom.

During this disturbed spring of 1871, Madame de Clericy and Lucille returned to Hopton, where a warm and pleasant April made them admit that the English climate was not wholly bad. For my own part, it is in the autumn that I like Hopton best, when the old cock pheasants call defiance to each other in the spinneys, and the hedgerows rustle with life.

The ladies were kind enough to make known to me their amended opinion of England when I went down to my home, soon after Easter; and indeed I thought the old place looking wonderfully homelike and beautiful, with the young green about its gray walls and the sense of spring in the breeze that blew across the table-land.

I arrived unexpectedly; for some instinct told me that it would be better to give Isabella no notice of my coming into her neighbourhood. As I rode up the avenue I saw Lucille, herself the incarnation of spring, moving among the flowers. She turned at the sound of the horse's tread, and changed colour when she recognised me. A flush—I suppose of anger—spread over her face.

"I have come, Mademoiselle," I said, "with good news for you. You may soon return home now, and turn your back forever on Hopton."

"I am not so ungrateful as you persist in considering me," she said, with vivacity, "and I like Hopton."

The gardener came forward to take my horse, and we walked towards the house together.

"I am grateful to you, Monsieur Howard," said Lucille, in a softer voice than I had yet heard her use towards me—and in truth I knew every tone of it—"for all that you have done for mother—for us, I mean. You have been a friend in need."

This sudden change of manner was rather bewildering, and I made no doubt that the victim of it was dumb and stupid enough to arouse any woman's anger. But Lucille was always too quick for me, and by the time I began to understand her humour it changed and left me far behind.

"Where have you been all these months?" she asked, almost as if the matter interested her. "And why have you not written?"

"I have been chasing a chimera, Mademoiselle."

"Which you will never catch."

"Which I shall never abandon," answered I, quite failing to emulate her lightness of tone.

When we went indoors and found Madame with her lace-work in the morning-room upstairs, with the windows overlooking the sea—the room, by the way, where I now sit and write—Lucille's manner as abruptly changed again.

"Mother," she said, "here is Monsieur Howard, our benefactor."

"I am glad, mon ami, that you have come," were Madame's words of welcome. And after the manner of good housewives she then inquired when and where I had last eaten.

I had brought a number of the illustrated journals of the day, and with the aid of these convinced even Lucille that the flight from Paris had not been an unnecessary precaution. Upon the heels of the horror of the long siege had followed the greater disorder of the Commune, when brave men were shot down by the insurgent National Guard, and all Paris was at the mercy of the rabble.

Indeed, this Reign of Terror must ever remain a blot on the civilisation of the century and the history of the French people.

It was apparent to me that while Madame de Clericy, who was of a more philosophic nature, accepted exile and dependence on myself without great reluctance, Lucille chafed under the knowledge that they were for the moment beholden to me. I had, as a matter of fact, come at Madame's request, who could make but little of the English newspapers, and thirsted for tidings from Paris. The respectable Paris newspapers had one after the other been seized and stopped by the Commune, while the postal service had itself collapsed.

The Vicomtesse also wished for details of her own affairs, and had written to me respecting a sale of some property in order to raise ready money and pay off her debt towards myself. It was with a view of discussing these questions that I had journeyed down to Hopton. So at least I persuaded myself to believe, and knew, at the sight of Lucille among the gnarled old trees, that the self-deception was a thin one. Alphonse had gone to France, being now released from his parole, so I was spared the sight of Lucille and him together.

Madame, however, would not allow me to make my report until we had dined, and we spent the intervening hour in talk of Paris, and the extraordinary events passing there. The ladies, as indeed ladies mostly are, were staunch Royalists, and while evincing but little sympathy for the fallen Buonapartes, learnt with horror of the rise of Anarchy and Republicanism in Paris.

"My poor country," exclaimed Madame. "It will be impossible to live in France again."

And Lucille's eyes lighted up with anger when I told her of the plots to assassinate the Duc D'Aumale—that brave soldier and worthiest member of his family—merely because he was of the Royal race.

All Europe awaited at this time the fall of the desperate Communards, who held Paris and defied the government of Versailles, while experts vowed that the end could not be far off. It seemed impossible that a rabble under the command of first one and then another adventurer could hold the capital against disciplined troops, and I, like the majority of onlookers, underestimated the possible duration of this second siege. However, my listeners were consoled with the prospect of returning to their beloved France before the summer passed.

Madame, as I remember, made a great feast in honour of my coming, and the old

butler, who had served my father and still called me Master Dick, with an admonishing shake of the head, brought from the cellar some great vintage of claret which Madame said could not have been bettered from the cave at La Pauline.

Again at dinner I thought there was a change in Lucille, who deferred to me on more than one occasion, and listened to my opinion almost as if it deserved respect. After dinner she offered to sing, which she had rarely done since the last sad days in Paris, and once more I heard those old songs of Provence that melt the heart.

It was when Lucille was tired that Madame asked me to make my report, and I produced the books. I had made a rough account showing Madame's liability to myself, and can only repeat now the confession made long ago that it was an infamous swindle. Madame had no head for figures, as she had, indeed, a hundred times informed me, and I knew well that she had no money to pay me. I had lived in this lady's house a paid dependant only in name and treated as an honoured guest. A time of trouble and distress having come to them, what could I do but help such friends to the best of my power, seeking to avoid any hurt to their pride?

I explained the figures to Madame de Clericy, whose bright quick eyes seemed to watch my face rather than the paper as my pen travelled down it. I began to feel conscious, as I often did in her presence, that I was but a clumsy oaf; and, furthermore, suspected that Lucille was watching me over the book she pretended to read.

"And this," said the Vicomtesse, when I had finished, "is how we stand towards each other?"—

"Yes, Madame."

And I dared not raise my eyes from the books before me. The Vicomtesse rose and moved towards the fireplace, where the logs burned brightly, for the spring evenings are cold on the East Coast, and we are glad enough to burn fires. She held my dishonest account in her hand and quietly dropped it into the fire.

"You are right, mon ami," she said, with a smile. "What we owe you cannot be set down on paper—but it was kind of you to try."

Lucille had risen to her feet. Her glance flashed from one to the other.

"Mother," she said coldly, "what have you done? How can we now pay Mr. Howard?"

Madame made no reply, reserving her defence—as the lawyers have it—until a fitter occasion. This presented itself later in the evening when mother and daughter were alone. Indeed, the Vicomtesse went to Lucille's room for the purpose.

"Lucille," she said, "I wish you would trust Mr. Howard as entirely as I do."

"But no one trusts him," answered Lucille, and her slipper tapped the floor. "Alphonse does not believe that he is looking for the money at all. It was for his own ends that he dismissed Mr. Devar, who was so hurt that he has never appeared since. And you do not know how he treated Isabella."

"How did he treat Isabella?" asked Madame quietly, and seemed to attach some importance to the question.

"He—well, he ought to have married her."

"Why?" asked Madame.

"Oh—it is a long story, and Isabella has only told me parts of it. She dislikes him, and with good cause."

Madame stood with one arm resting on the mantelpiece, the firelight glowing on her black dress. Her clever speculative eyes were fixed on the smouldering logs of driftwood. Lucille was moving about the room, exhibiting by her manner that impatience which the mention of my name seemed ever to arouse.

"Do not be hasty in judging," said the elder woman with a tolerance that few possess. "Isabella may have cause for complaint against him, or she may be suffering from wounded vanity. A woman's vanity is the rudder that shapes her course through life. If it be injured, the course will be a crooked one. Isabella is a disappointed woman—one sees it in her face. Of the two I prefer to trust Dick Howard, and wish that you could do the same. We know nothing of what may have passed between them, and can therefore form no opinion. One person alone knows, and that is John Turner. He is coming to stay here with Dick in a fortnight. Ask him to judge."

Madame continued thus to plead my cause, while I, no doubt, slept peacefully enough under the same roof, for I have never known what it is to lie awake with

my troubles. One damning fact the Vicomtesse could not disguise, namely, that she was for the moment dependent upon me.

"I would rather," said Lucille, "that it had been Alphonse."

To which Madame made no reply. She was a wise woman in that she never asked a confidence of her daughter, in whose happiness, I know, the interest of her life was centred. It is a great love that discriminates between curiosity and anxiety.

Lucille, however, wanted no help in the management of her life or the guidance of her heart, and made this clear to Madame. Indeed, she had of late begun to exercise somewhat of a sway over her mother, and appeared to be the ruling spirit; for youth is a force in itself. For my own part, however, I have always inclined to the belief that it is the quiet member of the family who manages and guides the household from the dim background of social obscurity. And although Madame de Clericy appeared to be mastered by her quick-witted, quick-spoken daughter, it was usually her will and not Lucille's that gained the victory in the end.

Lucille defended her absent friend with much spirit, and fought that lady's battles for her, protesting that Isabella had been ill used, and the victim of an unscrupulous adventurer. She doubtless said hard things of me, which have now been forgotten, for the lady who took my heart so quickly, and never lost her hold of it, was at this time spontaneous in thought and word, and quick to blame or praise.

WHEN MADAME WAS AT HER PRAYERS, A SWIFT, WHITE FORM
HURRIED INTO THE ROOM, AND HELD HER FOR A MOMENT IN A
QUICK EMBRACE.

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ROOM, AND HELD HER FOR A MOMENT IN A QUICK EMBRACE.

Mother and daughter parted for the night with a colder kiss than usual, and half an hour later, when Madame was at her prayers, a swift white form hurried into the room, held her for a moment in a quick embrace, and was gone before Madame could rise from her knees.

On the following afternoon, some hours after my departure, Isabella came to Hopton; and the dear friends, between whom there had never been a difference, had, as it appeared, a quarrel which sent Isabella home with close-pressed lips, and hurried Lucille to her room, her eyes angry and tearful. But the subject of

the disagreement was not myself—nor, indeed, was any definite explanation ever given as to why the two fell out.



Chapter XXIII

Wrecked

"Il ne faut confier son secret qu' à celui qui n'a pas cherché à le deviner."

"I do not care whether Paris is in the hands of the Communards or the other bunglers so long as the Bank of France holds good," said John Turner; and, indeed, I afterwards learnt that his whole fortune depended on this turn of the wheel.

We were travelling down to Hopton, and it was the last week of May. We bore to Madame de Clericy the news that at last the government troops had made their entry into Paris and were busy fighting in the streets there, hunting from pillar to post the remnant of the Communard rabble. The reign of terror which had lasted two and a half months was ended, and Paris lay like a ship that having passed through a great storm lies at last in calm water, battered and beaten. Priceless treasures had perished by the incendiarism of the wild mob—the Tuileries were burnt, the Louvre had barely escaped a like fate. The matchless Hôtel de Ville had vanished, and a thousand monuments and relics were lost for ever. Paris would never be the same again. Anarchy had swept across it, razing many buildings and crushing out not a few of those qualities of good taste and feeling which had raised Frenchmen to the summit of civilisation before the Empire fell.

John Turner was in good humour, for he had just learnt that, owing to the wit and nerve of one man, the Bank of France had stood untouched. With it was saved the house of Turner & Co., of Paris and London. The moment my friend's affairs were on a safe footing he placed himself at my service to help with the Vicomtesse de Clericy's more complicated difficulties. I was glad to avail myself of the assistance of one whose name was a by-word for rectitude and stability. Here, at all events, I had a colleague whose word could not be doubted by Isabella, of whose father John Turner had been a friend as well as of my own.

"Heard any more of Misté?" inquired Turner, while the train stood at Ipswich station; for he was much too easy-going to shout conversation during the progress of our journey.

"Sander writes that he has nearly caught him twice, and singularly enough has done better since you gave Mr. Devar his *congé*."

"Nothing singular about that. Devar was in the swindle and kept Miste advised of your movements. But there is some one else in it, too."

"A third person?"

"Yes," answered Turner. "A third person. I have been watching the thing, Dick, and am not such a fat old fool as you take me for. It was neither Miste nor Devar who cashed that draft. If you catch Miste you will probably catch some one else, too, some knight-errant of finance, or I am much mistaken."

At this moment the train moved on, and my friend composed his person for a sleep which lasted until we reached Saxmundham.

"I suppose," said my companion, waking up there, "that Mademoiselle of the *beaux yeux* is to marry Alphonse when the fortune is recovered?"

"I suppose so," answered I, and John Turner closed his eyes again with a queer look.

In the station enclosure at Lowestoft we found Alphonse Giraud enjoying himself immensely on the high seat of a dog-cart, controlling, with many French exclamations, and a partial success, the movements of a cob which had taken a fancy to progress backwards round and round the yard.

"It is," he explained, with a jerky salutation of the whip, "the Sunday-school treat departing for Yarmouth. They marched in here with a brass band—too much—Whoa! *le petit*, whoa!—too much for our feelings. There—*bonjour*, Monsieur Turner—how goes it? There—now we stand still.

"Not for long," said Turner, doubtfully; "and I never get in or out of anything when it is in motion."

With the assistance of sundry idle persons we held the horse still enough for my friend to take his seat beside Alphonse, while I and the luggage found place behind them. We dashed out of the gate at a speed and risk which gave obvious satisfaction to our driver, and our progress up the narrow High Street was a series of hairbreadth escapes.

"It is a pleasure," said Alphonse, airily, as we passed the lighthouse and the cob

settled down into a steady trot, "to drive such a horse as this."

"No doubt," said Turner; "but next time I take a cab."

We arrived at the Manor House in time for luncheon, and were received by the ladies at the door. Lucille, I remember, looked grave, but it appeared that the Vicomtesse was in good spirits.

"Then the news is true," she cried, before we had descended from our high places.

"Yes, Madame, for a wonder good news is true," answered Turner, and he stood bareheaded, after the manner of his adopted country, while he shook hands.

On this occasion we all frankly spoke French, for to John Turner this language was second nature. We had plenty to talk of during luncheon, and learnt much from the Paris banker which had never appeared in the newspapers. He had, indeed, passed through a trying ordeal, and that with an imperturbable nerve and coolness of head. He made, however, little of his own difficulties, and gave all his attention to Madame's affairs. Whenever he made mention of my name I saw Lucille frown.

After luncheon we went to the garden, which extends from the grim old house to the cliff-edge, and is protected on either side by a double rank of Scotch firs, all twisted and gnarled by the winter winds—all turning westward, with a queer effect as of raised shoulders and shivering limbs.

Within the boundary we have always, however, succeeded in growing such simple flowers as are indigenous to British soil—making a gay appearance and filling the air with clean-smelling scents.

"Your garden," said Madame, touching my arm as we passed out of the dining-room window, "always suggests to me the English character—not much flower, but a quantity of tough wood."

Alphonse joined us, and embarked at once on the description of an easterly gale such as are too common on this coast, but new to him and grand enough in its onslaught. For the wind hurls itself unchecked against the cliff and house after its career across the North Sea.

Lucille and John Turner had walked slowly away together down the narrow path running from the house to the solid entrenchment of turf that stands on the cliff

edge, covered with such sparse grass and herb as the sand and spray may nourish.

"It is pleasant," Lucille said, as they went from us, "to have some one to talk French with."

She was without her hat or gloves, and I saw the sunlight gleaming on her hair.

"You have Alphonse Giraud," said Turner, in his blunt way.

Lucille shrugged her shoulders.

"And Howard, from time to time," added the banker, who, having received permission to smoke a cigar, was endeavouring to extract a penknife from his waistcoat pocket.

"Who talks French with the understanding of an Englishman," said Lucille, quickly.

"You do not like Englishmen?"

"I like honest ones, Monsieur," said Lucille, looking across the sea.

"Ah!"

"Oh, yes—I know," cried Lucille, impatiently. "You are one of Mr. Howard's partisans. They are so numerous and so ready to speak for him—and he will never speak for himself."

"Then," said John Turner, smoking placidly, "let us agree to differ on that point."

But Lucille had no such intention.

"Does Mr. Howard ask you—you and mother, and sometimes Alphonse—to fight his battles for him and to sing his praises to me?"

Turner did not answer at once.

"Well?" she inquired, impatiently.

"I was just thinking how long it is since Dick Howard mentioned your name to me—about three months, I believe."

Lucille walked on with her head erect.

"What have you against him?" asked Turner, after a short silence.

"It was from your house that Mr. Howard came to us. He came to my father assuring him that he was poor, which he told me afterwards was only a subterfuge and false pretence. I then learnt from Mr. Gayerson that this was not the truth. I suppose Mr. Howard thought that a woman's affection is to be bought by gold."

"All that can be explained, Mademoiselle."

"Then explain it, Monsieur."

"Let Howard do it," said Turner, pausing to knock the ash from his cigar.

"I do not care for Mr. Howard's explanations," said Lucille, coldly. "One never knows what to believe. Is he rich or poor?"

"I WAS JUST THINKING HOW LONG IT IS SINCE DICK HOWARD MENTIONED YOUR NAME TO ME—ABOUT THREE MONTHS, I BELIEVE." LUCILLE WALKED ON WITH HER HEAD ERECT.

"I WAS JUST THINKING HOW LONG IT IS SINCE DICK HOWARD MENTIONED YOUR NAME TO ME—ABOUT THREE MONTHS, I BELIEVE." LUCILLE WALKED ON WITH HER HEAD ERECT.

"He is which he likes."

Lucille gave a scornful laugh.

"He could be rich to-morrow if he would do as I advise him," grunted Turner.

"What is that, Monsieur?"

"Marry money and a woman he does not love."

They walked on for some moments in silence, and came to the turf entrenchment raised against the wind, as against an assaulting army. They passed through a gangway, cut in the embankment, to one of the seats built against the outer side of it. Below them lay the clean sands, stretching away on either side in unbroken smoothness—the sands of Corton.

"And why will he not take your advice?" asked Lucille.

"Because he is a pig-headed fool—as his father was before him. It is all his father's fault, for placing him in such an impossible position."

"I do not understand," said Lucille.

John Turner crossed his legs with a grunt of obesity.

"It is nevertheless simple, Mademoiselle," he said; "father and son quarrelled because old Howard, who was as obstinate as his son, made up his mind that Dick should marry Isabella Gayerson. Plenty of money, adjoining estates, the old story of misery with many servants. Dick, being his father's son, at once determined that he would do no such thing, and there was a row royal. Dick went off to Paris, in debt and heedless of the old man's threat to cut him off with a shilling. He had never cared for Isabella, and was not going to sell his liberty for the sake of a ring fence. His own words, Mademoiselle. At Paris sundry things happened to him, of which you probably know more than I."

He glanced up at Lucille, who was picking blades of grass from the embankment against which he leant. Her eyelids flickered, but she made no reply.

"Then," went on John Turner, "his father died suddenly, and it transpired that the hot-headed old fool had made one of those wills which hot-headed old fools make for the special delectation of novelists and lawyers. He had left Dick penniless, unless he consented to marry Isabella. When Dick told your father he was poor, he was well within the limits of the truth, although he did it, as I understand, to gain his own ends. When he told you a different story, he merely assumed that this quarrel, like others, would end in a reconciliation. He felt remorseful that he had practised a mild deception on your father, and wished to clear his conscience. Death intervened at this moment, and placed our young friend in the uncomfortable position of having told untruths all round. You probably know better than I do, Mademoiselle, why he got himself into this hobble."

But Lucille would make no such admission.

"But you ignore Isabella," she cried, impatiently, "you and Mr. Howard."

"She will not allow us to do that, my dear young lady."

"Is she to wait with folded hands until Mr. Howard decides whether he is inclined to marry her or not?"

"There is no waiting in the question," said John Turner. "Dick made up his mind long ago, in the lifetime of his father, and Isabella must be aware of his decision. Besides, Mademoiselle, you can judge for yourself. Is there any love lost

between them, think you?"

"No."

"Is there any reason why they should be miserable if they do not want to be?"

"Isabella could not be more miserable than she is now, though she hides it well."

"Ah," said John Turner, thoughtfully. "Is that so? I wonder why."

Lucille shrugged her shoulders. She either could not or would not answer.

"Too much money," suggested Turner.

"When women have plenty of money they usually want something that cannot be bought."

Lucille frowned.

"And now you are angry, Mademoiselle," said John Turner, placidly, "and I am not afraid. I will make you still more angry."

He rose heavily, and stood, cigar in hand, looking out to sea—his round face puckered with thought.

"Mademoiselle Lucille," he said, slowly, "I have known some men and quite a number of women who have sacrificed their happiness to their pride. I have known them late in life, when the result had to be lived through. They were not good company. If pride or love must go overboard, Mademoiselle, throw pride."



Chapter XXIV

An Explanation

"La discretion défend de questionner, la délicatesse défend même de deviner."

We were a quiet party that evening, Madame having decided to ask no one to meet us. It was like a piece of the old Paris life, for all had met for better or worse in that city, and spoke the language of the once brilliant capital.

Madame insisted that I should take the head of the table, she herself occupying a chair at the foot, which had remained vacant as long as I could remember. So I sat for the first time in the seat of my ancestors, whence my father had issued his choleric mandates, only, I fear, to be answered as hotly.

"You are quiet, Monsieur," said Lucille, who sat at my right hand, and I thought her glance searched my face in a way that was new.

"Say he is dull," put in Alphonse, whose gaiety was at high-water mark. "*Ce cher Dick*—he is naturally so."

And he laughed at me with his old look of affection.

"Mademoiselle means that I am duller than usual," I suggested.

"No," said Lucille, "I meant what I said."

"As always?" inquired Alphonse, in a low voice aside.

"As always," she answered, gravely. And I think she only spoke the truth.

We did not sit long over our wine, and John Turner reserved his cigar until a later opportunity.

"I'll play you a game of billiards," he said, looking at me.

In the drawing-room we found Lucille already; at the piano.

"I have some new songs," she said, "from the Basque country. I wonder if you

will prefer them to the old."

I was crossing the room towards Madame, and a silence made me pause and look towards the piano. Lucille was addressing me—and no doubt I was clumsy enough to betray my surprise.

"I think I shall prefer the old ones, Mademoiselle," I answered.

She was fingering the pages carelessly, and Alphonse, who was always quick at such matters, stepped forward.

"As the songs are new the pages will require turning."

"Thank you," answered Lucille, rather coldly as I thought, and Madame looked at me with a queer expression of impatience, as if I had done something amiss. She took up her book and presently closed her eyes. John Turner did the same, and I, remembering that he was a heavy breather, went up to him.

"I am ready to beat you at billiards," I said.

Lucille and Alphonse were so much engaged at the piano as to be apparently oblivious to our departure. I suppose that they were grateful to us in their hearts for going.

My friend did not play long or skilfully, and I, like all ne'er-do-wells, played a fair game in those days.

"Yes," he said, when handsomely beaten, "you evidently play on Sundays. Let us sit down and smoke."

I could not help noticing that the music had ceased. Lucille and Alphonse were probably talking together in low voices at the piano while Madame kindly slept.

"Don't scowl at me like that," said John Turner, "but take one of these cigars."

We sat down, and smoked for some time in silence.

"It is one thing," said my companion at length, "to give a man a fair chance, and another to throw away your own."

"What do you mean?"

"Why marry Mademoiselle to a weak-kneed fellow like Giraud?"

"He is not a weak-kneed fellow," I interrupted, "and can sit a horse as well as any man in the county."

"Life does not consist of sitting on horses."

"And he has proved himself a brave soldier."

"A man may be a brave soldier and make a poor fight of his life," persisted Turner. "Besides, it is against her will."

"Against her will?"

"Yes," said John Turner. "She wants to marry quite a different man."

"That may be," answered I, "but it is none of my business. I have no influence with Mademoiselle, who is one of my enemies. I have many."

"No—you haven't," said Turner, stoutly. "You have but one, and she is a clever one. Isabella Gayerson is a dangerous foe, my boy. She has poisoned the minds of Lucille and Alphonse against you. She has tried to do the same by the Vicomtesse, and failed. She encouraged and harboured Devar in order to annoy you. You and I start for Paris to-morrow afternoon. Take my advice and ride over to Little Corton to-morrow morning. See Isabella, and have it out with her. Talk to her as you would to a man. Life would be so much simpler if people would only recognise that sex is only a small part of it. Tell her you will see her d——d before you marry her, or words to that effect. It is all a matter of vanity or money. I'm going to bed. Good-night. My apologies to the ladies."

He took his candle, and left me with half a cigar to smoke.

I was up betimes the next morning, and set off on horseback through the quiet lanes soon after breakfast. Little Corton stands a mile inland, and two miles nearer to Lowestoft than the old Manor House of Hopton. Between the houses there is little pasture land, and I rode through fresh green corn with the dew still on it. The larks—and they are nowhere so numerous as on our sea-bound uplands—were singing a blithe chorus. The world was indeed happy that May morning.

The sight of the homely red walls of Little Corton nestling among the elms brought to my mind a hundred memories of the past days, wherein Isabella's parents had ever accorded a welcome to myself—a muddy-booted boy then, with but an evil reputation in the country-side.

Isabella had gone out, they told me, but as she had taken neither hat nor gloves, the servants opined that she could not be far away. I went in search, and found her in the beech wood. She had taken her morning letters there, and read them as she walked, her dress stirring the dead leaves. She did not hear my footstep until I was close upon her.

"Ah! have you come to tell me that Lucille and Alphonse are engaged?" she asked, without even bidding me good morning. In her eyes, usually quiet and reserved, there was a look of great expectancy.

"No."

She folded her letters slowly, and as we walked side by side her quiet eyes came slantwise to my face in a searching glance. She asked no other question, however, and left the burthen of the silence with me. There was a rustic seat near to us, and with one accord we went to it and sat down. Isabella seemed to be breathless, I know not why, and her bodice was stirred by the rapidity of her breathing. I noticed again that my old playmate was prettier than I had ever suspected—a strongly-built woman, upright and of a fine, graceful figure.

"Don't beat about the bush," John Turner had advised, and I remembered his words now.

"Isabella," I said, awkwardly enough, as I stirred the dead leaves with my whip, "Isabella, do you know the terms of my father's will?"

She did not answer at once, and, glancing in her direction, I saw that she had flushed like a schoolgirl.

"ISABELLA," I SAID, AWKWARDLY ENOUGH, AS I STIRRED THE DEAD LEAVES WITH MY WHIP, "ISABELLA, DO YOU KNOW THE TERMS OF MY FATHER'S WILL?" SHE DID NOT ANSWER AT ONCE, AND, GLANCING IN HER DIRECTION, I SAW THAT SHE HAD FLUSHED LIKE A SCHOOLGIRL.

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"Yes," she answered at length.

"I am penniless unless you marry me."

"Yes—I know."

Her voice was quiet and composed. Isabella was younger than I, but in her presence I always felt myself her inferior and junior, as, no doubt, I had always been in mind though not in years.

"You have always been my enemy, Isabella."

"Why should I be that?" she asked.

"I suppose it is on account of the squire's will."

"I care nothing for that."

"Then, if you are not my enemy, if you do not hate me—I do not recollect doing you an injury—if you do not hate me, why have you poisoned Lucille's mind against me and made Alphonse distrust me? Why did you encourage Devar, whom you knew to be my enemy?"

"So you have ridden over in order to bring these charges against me," answered Isabella, in her coldest voice; "and you came at a time when you knew you would find me alone, so as to do it the more effectually."

"I am letting you know that I am aware that you dislike me, and want to be told why. Do you remember long ago at the gate over there leading to Drake's Spinney? It was the first time you had put your hair up and had a long dress on. I was a clumsy oaf and did not know that those things made such a difference. I gave you a push as you were climbing over, and you fell."

"Yes," said Isabella; "I remember."

"You hurt yourself, and cried, and said you hated me then. And I believe you did, for you have never been the same since. That was fourteen years ago, Isabella—my first year at Cambridge. You were eighteen then."

"Yes," answered Isabella, in a chilly voice. "You have all your dates very correct, and a simple addition sum will tell you that I am thirty-two now—a middle-aged woman, whose hair is turning grey! Thirty-two!"

And I was too stupid, or too wise, to tell her that she did not look it.

"I do not know," I said instead, "why you should have turned against me then, and remembered so long a mere boyish jest; for I thought we were to be good friends always—as we had been—and never dreamt that a few hairpins could make us different."

Isabella sat with her still, white hands clasped in her lap, and looked towards the gate that had caused this childish breach; but I could not see the expression on her face.

"My father," I went on, determined to speak out that which was in my mind, "had no business to make such a will, which could only lead to trouble. And I should have been a scoundrel had I sacrificed your happiness to my own cupidity—or, rather, had I attempted to do so. You might have thought it your duty to take me, Isabella, had I asked you to, for the sake of the money—though you have always spared me any doubts as to your opinion of me. You have always known my faults, and been less charitable towards them than anyone else. I should have been a scoundrel indeed had I asked you to sacrifice yourself."

She sat quite still, and was breathing quietly now.

"So I came to talk it over with you—as old friends, as if we were two men."

"Which we are not," put in Isabella, with her bitter laugh; and God knows what she meant.

"We were placed in an impossible position by being thus asked to marry against our will. I did not ever think of you in that way—think of loving you, I mean. And you have made it plain enough, of course, that you do not love me. On the contrary—"

"Of course," she echoed, in a queer, tired voice. "On the contrary."

I somehow came to a stop, and sat mutely seeking words. At last, however, I broke the silence.

"Then," I said, making an effort to speak lightly and easily, "we understand each other now."—

"Yes," she answered; "we understand each other now."

I rose, for there seemed nothing more to be said, and yet feeling that I was no further on—that there was something yet misunderstood between us.

"And we are friends again, Isabella."

I held out my hand, and, after a momentary pause, she placed her fingers in it. They were cold.—"Yes, I suppose so," she said, and her lips were quivering.

I left her slowly, and with a feeling of reluctance. My way lay over the gate, where fourteen years earlier I had made that mistake. As I climbed it, I looked back. Isabella had turned sideways on the seat, and her face was hidden in her arms folded on the back of it. She seemed to be weeping. I stood for a minute or two in indecision. Then, remembering how she disliked me, went slowly on to the stable, and found my horse.



Chapter XXV

Paris Again

"Le courage commence l'œuvre et ... "

The same afternoon John Turner and I quitted Hopton. I with a heavy enough heart, which, *d'ailleurs*, I always carried when leaving Lucille. There was, however, work to be done, and a need for instant action is one of the surest antidotes to sad thought. I was engaged, moreover, in affairs intimately concerning Lucille. A man, it appears, whose heart is taken from him, is best employed in doing something for the woman who has it. No other occupation will fully satisfy him.

We journeyed to London, and there took the night train to Paris, crossing the Channel in a boat crowded with Frenchmen, who had contented themselves with deploring their country's evil day from across seas. As we drove through the streets of Paris in the early morning, John Turner sat looking out of the window of a cab. Never, surely, has a city been so wasted and destroyed.

"The d——d fools; the d——d fools!" my companion muttered under his breath. And I believe the charred walls of each ruined landmark burnt into his soul.

I left John Turner in his rooms in the Avenue d'Antan, where everything seemed to be in order, and drove across to the Quartier St. Germain. It was my intention to dwell in the Hôtel Clericy until that house could be made habitable for the ladies. The *concierge*, I found, had been killed in one of the sorties, and his wife had, with the quick foresight of her countrywomen, secured the safety of the house by letting a certain portion of it in apartments to the officers of the National Guard as soon as the Commune was declared.

These gentlemen (one arrogant captain, I was informed, sold cat's meat in times of peace) had lived with a fine military freedom, and left marks of their boots on all the satin chairs. They had made a practice of throwing cigar ends and matches on the carpets, had stabbed a few pictures and bespattered the walls with wine, but a keen regard for their own comfort had prevented further wanton damage, and all could be repaired within a few days.

The woman made me some coffee, and while I was drinking it brought me a telegram.

"Sander wires that he has run Miste to earth in Nice. Wait for me. I follow by day mail."

The message was from Alphonse Giraud.

I laboured all day in Madame's interests, and re-engaged some of the servants who had been scattered by the war and Commune, and a fear, perhaps, of acknowledging any sympathy for the nobility.

In the evening I met Alphonse Giraud on his arrival at the Gare du Nord, and found him in fine feather, carrying a stick of British oak, which he had bought, he told me, for Miste's back.

"It will not be a matter of hitting each other with walking sticks," I answered.

We drove across to the Lyons station, and took the night mail to Marseilles. It was my second night out of bed. But I was hardy in those days, and can still thank God that I am stronger than many of my contemporaries.

"Confound you!" cried Alphonse to me the next morning as the train raced down the valley of the Loire. "You have slept all night!"

"Of course."

"And I not a wink—when each moment brings us nearer to Miste. You are no sportsman after all, Dick."

"He is the best sportsman who has the coolest head," replied I, sleepily.

We arrived at Nice in the afternoon. The very pavement smelt of heat. At the station a man came up to me, and, raising his hat, spoke my name. He handed me a letter, which I read then and there.

"The bearer is watching Miste in Nice. I am going to stop the passages by Ventimiglia and the Col di Tende. Miste has evidently appointed to meet his confederate at Genoa. Two passages have been taken on the steamer sailing Saturday thence to Buenos Ayres."

The letter was unsigned, but the handwriting that of my astute agent, Sander. Things were beginning to look black for Monsieur Miste. I saw plainly enough

that Sander was thinking only of the money, and meant to catch both the thieves. The bearer of the letter, who was a Frenchman, said that he had his eye on Miste, who was staying in the old inn of the Chapeau Rouge at the top of the Quai Massena, and passed for a commercial traveller there.

"Monsieur must not molest my charge," he said. "Mr. Sander has so ordered. It is probable that Miste has in his possession only a portion of the money."

"ARE WE MEN?" RETORTED ALPHONSE, IN RESPONSE, AS HE WRESTLED WITH HIS SHIRT COLLAR, "OR ARE WE SCHOOLGIRLS? TELL ME THAT, MR. THE POLICEMAN!"

"ARE WE MEN?" RETORTED ALPHONSE, IN RESPONSE, AS HE WRESTLED WITH HIS SHIRT COLLAR, "OR ARE WE SCHOOLGIRLS? TELL ME THAT, MR. THE POLICEMAN!"

We went to the Hôtel des Anglais, and there wrote fictitious names in the police register; for it was impossible to be too careful. Alphonse, in his zeal, would have written himself down an Englishman had I not remonstrated, and told him that the ordinary housefly could have in its mind no doubt as to his nationality. So he borrowed the name of a friend who had gone to Pondicherry. Our orders were to keep within the hotel garden, and thus in masterly inactivity we passed the afternoon and evening. The heat was intense, and the gay town deserted. Indeed, one half of the shops were closed.

I went to bed early, and was already asleep when a great rapping aroused me. It was Sander's colleague, who came into my room, and dismissed the waiter who had brought him thither. Alphonse, aroused by the clamour, appeared on the scene, making use of a door of communication connecting our rooms.

"Quick, Messieurs!" the man said. "Into your clothes. I will tell you my news as you dress. My man," he went on, acting valet as he spoke, "has left by the night diligence for St. Martin Lantosque. But, tell me, are these gentlemen good for forty miles on horseback to-night?"

"Are we men?" retorted Alphonse, in response, as he wrestled with his shirt collar, "or are we schoolgirls? Tell me that, Mr. the Policeman!"

"You can only hope to do it on horseback," continued the man. "It is sixty kilometres, and for thirty of them you mount. No carriage ascends at the trot. The diligence is the quickest on the road. It proceeds at the trot where the hired carriages go at a snail's pace. You hire horses—they are your own. You beat them—*hein!*"

And he made a gesture descriptive of a successful and timely arrival.

"It is my custom," he went on, confidentially, "to make sure that my patients are comfortably in bed at night. I go this evening to the Chapeau Rouge—Monsieur knows the house—facing the river; wine excellent—drainage leaves to be desired. Well, I find our friend is absent—has taken his luggage. He has vanished—*Pfui!* I know he is safe at eight o'clock—at ten he is gone. There are no trains. This man wants to get to Italy, I know. There is no boat. One way remains. To take the diligence to St. Martin Lantosque, five miles from the frontier, at the head of the valley of the Vesubie—to walk over the pass; it is but a footpath, and now buried under the snow—to reach the wildest part of northern Italy, and, if the good God so will it, arrive at Entraque. Thence by way of Cuneo and Savona one takes the train to Genoa. I inquire at the diligence office. It is as I suspected. Miste is in the diligence. He is now"—the man paused to consult his watch—"between La Tourette and Levens. It is 11:30. The diligence was twenty minutes late in starting. Our friend has two hours and ten minutes start of these gentlemen."

By way of reply we made greater haste, and, in truth, were aided therein by our new ally, who, if he possessed a busy tongue, had fingers as active.

"The horses," he continued, "await us in the Rue Paradis, just behind here—a quiet street—good horses of two comrades of mine in the mounted gendarmerie who are away on furlough. If necessary, you can leave them at the Hôtel des Alpes, at St. Martin, and write me word. If the horses come to harm, I know these gentlemen will not let my comrades suffer."

Here Alphonse, who had borrowed the money from me earlier in the day, produced two notes of five hundred francs, and pressed them unavailingly on the agent.

As we walked rapidly towards the Rue Paradis, our masterful friend gave us particulars of the road.

"It is," he said, "the route de Levens. Monsieur knows it—well, no matter! They say it was built hundreds of years before the Romans came. One ascends this bank of the river until the road divides, then to the left through the village of St. André. After two kilometres one finds one's self in a gorge—the cliffs on either side of many hundred feet. There are places where the sunlight never enters. It is an ascent always—follows La Tourette, a fortified village high above the road on the right. Then the road becomes dangerous. There are places between Levens

and St. Jean de la Rivière where to make a false step is to fall a thousand feet. One hears the Vesubie roaring far below, but the river is invisible—it is dark even at midday. The great cliffs are unbroken by a tree or a pathway. This is the Col du Dragon, a great height. In descending one passes through a long tunnel cut in the rock, and that is half-way. At St. Jean de la Rivière you will find yourselves in the valley of the Vesubie. Here, again, one mounts continually by the side of the river. The road is a dangerous one, for there are landslips and chutes of stone—at times the whole roadway is swept down into the river."

The man, with the quick gestures of his people, described all so graphically that I could see the road and its environments as he traversed it in imagination.

"Before long, however, one sees Venanson," he went on, "a church and village on a point of rock far above the river. At a turn of the road Venanson is left behind; and in front, three thousand feet above the sea, surrounded by snow mountains, lies St. Martin Lantosque. The air is cold, the people are different from the Niçois—it is another world. These gentlemen have a wonderful ride before them, and there is a moon. If I were a younger man—but there! I am married, and have two children. Also I am afraid of my wife. Mon Dieu! I make no concealment of it. My comrades know that I fear nothing that comes in the way of our business; but I tremble before my wife—a little woman as high as my elbow. What will you? A tongue!—*Pstt!*"

And with his forefinger he described in the air the descent of a fork of lightning.

"These are the horses, gentlemen."

And indeed he had done us well.

"Your comrades," I said, "must be fine fellows," as I climbed up the side of a horse as tall as one of my own hunters at home.

We were soon on the road, which was plain enough, and Alphonse had crammed a handful of the hotel matches into his pocket in case we should have to climb the sign posts.

My companion, it may be imagined, was in high good humour, and sat on the top of his great charger in a state of ebullient excitement worthy of a schoolboy on his first mount.

"Ah!" he cried, as we clattered along the dusty road before the great mad-house, "this is sport, my friend. Surely, fox-hunting cannot beat this?"

"'Tis rather like riding to covert, but we cannot tell what sport this fox will give us."

The police horses were heavy footed, and wore part of their professional accoutrement, so we made a military clatter which obviously pleased the brave soul of my companion.

We had to make all speed, and yet spare no care, for should we make a false turn there would be no stopping Monsieur Misté on this side of the frontier. There were, fortunately, many carts on the road with teams of four or five horses, carrying vast loads of produce from the outlying villages to Nice. Of the drivers of these we made careful inquiries, though we often had to wake them for the purpose, as they lay asleep on the top of the load of hay or straw. One of these men thanked us for arousing him, and would have detained us to relate a tale of some carter who, at a spot called the "Saut du Français," had been thrown thus, as he slept, from the summit of his hay cart, and was broken to pieces on the rock two thousand feet below.

As we topped the Col du Dragon the day broke, and lighted up the white peaks in front of us with a pink glow. The vast snow-capped range of the Alpes Maritimes was stretched out before us like a panorama—behind us the Mediterranean lay in a blue and perfect peace. The air was cool and clear as spring water.

Alphonse Giraud pulled off his hat as he looked around him.

"Blessed Name," he cried, "what a world the good God made when He was busy with it."

Our horses threw up their heads, and answered to the voice with a willingness that made us wish we had a shorter journey before us.

At St. Jean de la Rivière we rested them for fifteen minutes. The villagers were already astir, and we learnt that we had as yet gained only half an hour on the diligence.

There was no doubt about the road now, for we were enclosed in a narrow valley, with only the great thoroughfare built above the river, and that not too securely. We made good speed, and soon sighted Venanson, a queer village perched above all vegetation on the spur of a mountain.

At a turn of the road we seemed suddenly to quit France, and wheel into

Switzerland. The air was Alpine, and the vegetation that of the higher valleys there. It was near seven o'clock when we approached St. Martin Lantosque, a quaint brown village of wood, clustering around a domed church.

We soon found the Hôtel des Alpes, which was but a sorry inn of no great cleanliness. The proprietor, a white-faced man, watched us descend without enthusiasm.

"What time did the diligence come in?" I asked him.

"These gentlemen have ridden," he said pleasantly.

He was joined at this moment by a person who seemed to be a waiter, though he was clad more like a stable help.

I repeated my question at a shout, and the attendant, placing his lips against the innkeeper's ear, issued another edition of it in a voice that awakened an echo far across the vale, and startled the tired horses.

"The patron is deaf," explained the servant.

"You don't say so," I answered.

We gave these people up as hopeless, and Alphonse had the brilliant idea of applying at the post-office across the way. Here we found an intelligent man. Miste had arrived by the diligence. He had sent a telegram to Genoa. He had posted a letter; and, after a hurried breakfast at the hotel, he had set off half an hour ago by the bridle path to the Col di Finestra, alone and on foot.



Chapter XXVI

Above the Snow Line

".... le temps l'achève."

Before setting out we had a light breakfast at the Hôtel des Alpes, where we were informed by several other persons, and on two further occasions by the waiter that the "patron" was deaf. Indeed, the village had no other news.

The postmaster had ordered a carriage, which, however, could only take us two miles on our road, for this ceased at that distance, and only a bad bridle path led onward to Italy.

Alphonse was by this time beginning to feel the effects of his long ride and sleepless night; for he had not closed his eyes, while I had snatched a priceless hour of sleep. Moreover, the hardships of the campaign had rendered him less equal to a sudden strain than a man in good condition. He kept up bravely, however, despite a great thirst which at this time assailed him, and sent him to the brook at the side of the path much too often for his good.

We entered at once upon a splendid piece of mountain scenery, and soon left behind us the vivid green of the upper valley. To our left a sheer crag rose from the valley in one unbroken slope, and in front the mountains seemed to close and bar all progress. We had five thousand feet to climb from the frontier stone, and I anticipated having to accomplish the larger part of it alone. They had warned us that we should find eight feet of snow at the summit of the pass.

Miste had assuredly been hard pressed to attempt such a passage alone, and bearing, as he undoubtedly did, a large sum of money. The man had a fine nerve, at all events; for on the other side he would plunge into the wildest part of northern Italy, where the human scum that ever hovers on frontiers had many a fastness. Villainy always requires more nerve than virtue.

I meant, however, to catch Mr. Charles Miste on the French side of the Chapel of the Madonna di Finestra.

We trod our first snow at an altitude of about five thousand feet. The spring, it

will be remembered, was a cold one in 1870, and the snow lay late that year. At last, on turning a corner, we saw about two miles ahead of us a black form on the white ground, and I confess my heart stood still.

Alphonse, who had no breath for words, grasped my arm, and we stood for a moment watching Miste, for it could be no other. The sun was shining on the great snow-field, and the man's figure was the one dark spot there. He was evidently tired, and made but slow progress.

"I am not going to lose him now," I said to Alphonse. "If you cannot keep up with me, say so, and I will go on alone."

"You go at your own pace," answered the Frenchman, with admirable spirit, "and I will keep up till I drop. I mean to be in at the death if I can."

Miste never turned, but continued his painful, upward way. He was a light stepper, as his shallow footprints betokened; but I saw with grim delight that each step of mine overlapped his measure by a couple of inches.

There is nothing so still as the atmosphere of a summit, and in this dead silence we hurried on. Giraud's laboured breathing alone broke it. I glanced at him, and saw that his face was of a pasty white and gleaming with perspiration. Poor Alphonse had not much more in him. I slackened pace a little.

"We are gaining on him, every step tells," said I encouragingly, but it was clear that my companion would soon drop.

We went on in silence for nearly half an hour and gained visibly on Miste, who never looked back or paused. At the end of the time we were within a mile of him, and only spoke in whispers, for at such an altitude sound travels far. Every moment that Miste was ignorant of the pursuit was invaluable to us. I could see clearly now that it was he and no other; the man's back was familiar to me, and his lithe springy gait.

"Have you a revolver?" whispered Giraud as we stumbled on.

"Not I."

"Then take mine, I cannot—last—much longer."

Supposing that Miste should be in better training than myself! Supposing that when he turned and saw us he should be able to increase his pace materially, he

would yet escape me!

I stretched out my hand and took the revolver, which was of a familiar pattern. I made up my mind to shoot Miste sooner than lose him, for the chase had been a long one, and my blood was hot.

We were gaining on him still, and the heat of the day made him slacken his pace. The sun beat down on us from a cloudless sky. My lips and throat were like dry leather. Alphonse had long been cooling his with snow. We did not care to speak now. All our hearts were in our eyes; at any moment Miste might turn.

Suddenly Alphonse lagged behind. I glanced at him, and he pointed upward, so I went on. It was difficult enough to breathe at such an altitude, and my heart kept making matters worse by leaping to my throat and choking me. I felt giddy at times, and shivered, though the perspiration ran off my face like rain.

I was within three hundred yards of Miste now, and Alphonse was somewhere behind me, I could not pause to note how far. We were near the summit, and the world seemed to contain but three men. My breath was short, and there was clockwork going in my head.

Then at length Miste turned. He took all in at a glance, probably recognising us. At all events he had no doubt of our business there; for he hurried on, and I could see his hand at his jacket pocket. Still I gained on him.

"Beer against absinthe," I remember thinking.

There was an unbroken snow-field ahead of us, the sheer side of a mountain with the footpath cut across it—a strip of blue shadow.

After ten minutes of rapid climbing, Miste turned at length, and waited for me. He had a cool head; for he carefully buttoned his coat and stood sideways, presenting as small a target as possible.

He raised his revolver and covered me.

"He won't fire yet," thought I, forty yards below him, and I advanced quickly.

He stood covering me for a few seconds, and then lowered his arm and waited for me. In such an atmosphere we could have spoken in ordinary tones, but we had nothing to say. Monsieur Miste and I understood each other without need of words.

"Fire, you fool!" cried Giraud behind me—nearer than I had suspected.

I was within twenty yards of Misté now; the man had a narrow, white face, and was clean shaven. I saw it only for a moment, for the revolver came up again.

"He is probably a bad shot, and will miss first time," I thought quickly, as I crept upward. The slope was steep at this point.

I saw the muzzle of the revolver quiver—a sign, no doubt, that he was bearing on the trigger. Then there was a flash, and the report, as it seemed, of a cannon. I staggered back, and dropped on one knee. Misté had hit me in the shoulder. I felt the warm blood running down within my clothes, and had a queer sensation of having fallen from a great height.

"I'll kill him!—I'll kill him!" I found myself repeating in a silly way, as I got to my feet again.

No sooner was I up than Misté fired again, and I heard the bullet whistle past my ear. At this I whipped out Giraud's revolver, for I thought the next shot would kill me. The scoundrel let me have it a third time, and tore a piece out of my cheek; the pain of it was damnable. I now stood still and took a careful sight, remembering, in a dull way, to fire low. I aimed at his knees. Monsieur Charles Misté leapt two feet up into the air, fell face forwards, and came sliding down towards me, clutching at the snow with both hands.

I was trying to stop my two wounds, and began to be conscious of a swimming in the head. In a moment Giraud was by my side, and clapped a handful of snow on my cheek. He had been through the winter's campaign, and this was no new work for him. He tore open my shirt and pressed snow on the wound in my shoulder, from which the blood was pumping slowly. I was in a horrid plight, but in my heart knew all the while that Misté had failed to kill me.

Giraud poured some brandy into my mouth, and I suppose that I was nearly losing consciousness, for I felt the spirit running into me like new life.

In a minute or two we began to think of Misté, who was lying on his face a few yards away.

"All right now?" asked Alphonse, cheerily.

"All right," I answered, rising and going towards the black form of my enemy.

We turned him over. The eyes were open—large, liquid eyes, of a peculiarly gentle expression. I had seen them before, in Radley's Hotel at Southampton, under a gay little Parisian hat. I was down on my knees in the snow in a moment—all cold with the thought that I had killed a woman.

But Charles Misté was a man—and a dead one at that. My relief was so great that I could have shouted aloud. Misté had therefore been within my grasp at Southampton, only eluding me by a clever trick, carried out with consummate art. The dead face seemed to wear a smile as I looked at it.

Alphonse opened the man's shirt, and we looked at the small blue hole through which my bullet had found his heart. Death must have been very quick. I closed the gentle eyes, for they seemed to look at me from a woman's face.

"And now for his pockets!" I said, hardening my heart.

We turned them out one by one. His purse contained but little, and in an inner pocket some Italian silver, for use across the frontier. He had thought of everything, this careful scoundrel. In a side pocket, pinned to the lining of it, I found a flat packet enveloped in newspaper. This we unfolded hastily. It contained a number of papers. I opened one of them—a draft for five thousand pounds, drawn by John Turner on Messrs. Sweed & Carter of New York! I counted the drafts aloud and had a long task, for they numbered seventy-nine.

"AND NOW FOR HIS POCKETS!" I SAID, HARDENING MY HEART.

"AND NOW FOR HIS POCKETS!" I SAID, HARDENING MY HEART.

"That," I said, handing them to Giraud, "is the half of your fortune. If we have luck we shall find the remainder in Sander's hands at Genoa."

And Alphonse Giraud must needs embrace me, hurting my shoulder most infernally, and pouring out a rapid torrent of apology and self-recrimination.

"I listened when it was hinted to me that you were not honest," he cried, "that you were not seeking the money at all, or that you had already recovered it! I have watched you as if you were a thief—Mon Dieu, what a scoundrel I have been."

"At all events you have the money now."

"Yes." He paused, fingering the papers, while he thoughtfully looked down into the valley. "Yes, Dick—and it cannot buy me what I want."

Thus we are, and always shall be, when we possess at length that for which we have long yearned.

We made a further search in Misté's pockets, and found nothing. The man's clothing was of the finest, and his linen most clean and delicate. I had a queer feeling of regret that he should be dead—having wanted his life these many months and now possessing it. Ah—those accomplished desires! They stalk through life behind us—an army of silent ghosts. For months afterwards I missed him—incomprehensible though this may appear. A good foe is a tonic to the heart. Some of us are virtuous for the sake of our friends—others pay the tribute to their foes.

There was still plenty of work for us to do, though neither was in a state to execute it. My left arm had stiffened right down to the fingers, which kept closing up despite my endeavours to keep life and movement in them. The hurt in my cheek had fortunately ceased bleeding, and Giraud bound it up with Misté's handkerchief. I recall the scent of the fine cambric to this day, and when I smell a like odour see a dead man lying on a snow-field.

We composed Misté in a decent attitude, with his slim hands crossed on his breast, and then turned our steps downward towards St. Martin Lantosque. To one who had never known a day's illness, the fatigue consequent upon the loss of so much blood was particularly irksome, and I cursed my luck many a time as we stumbled over the snow. Giraud would not let me finish the brandy in his flask, but kept some for an emergency.

The peasants were at work in the fields when we at length reached the valley, and took no heed of us. We told no one of Misté lying alone on the snow far above, but went straight to the gendarmerie, where we found the chief—a sensible man, himself an old soldier—who heard our story to an end without interruption, and promised to give us all assistance. He sent at once for the doctor, and held my shoulder tenderly while the ball was taken from it. This he kept, together with Misté's revolver, and indeed acted throughout with the greatest shrewdness and good sense. As an old campaigner he strongly urged me to remain quietly at St. Martin for a few days until the fever which inevitably follows a bullet wound should have abated; but, on learning that it was my intention to proceed at once to Genoa, placed no difficulty in my way.

Knowing that I should find Sander at Genoa, where I could be tended, Giraud decided to remain at St. Martin Lantosque until Misté had been buried and all

formalities observed.

So I set forth alone about midday—in a private carriage placed at my disposal by some local good Samaritan—feeling like a worm and no man.



Chapter XXVII

The Hand of God

"Chacun ne comprend que ce qu'il retrouve en soi."

Mr. Sander only made a mistake common to Englishmen when he underrated the capacity of his neighbour. Hearing from his colleague in Nice that Misté had left that city for St. Martin Lantosque, with us upon his heels, Sander concluded that our quarry would escape us, and with great promptitude set forth to Cuneo to await his arrival there.

Before leaving Genoa, however, my agent took steps to ensure the transmission of his correspondence, and a telegram despatched by Giraud from St. Martin, after my departure thence, duly reached the addressee at Cuneo. On arriving, therefore, at Genoa, and going to the Hôtel de Gênes there, I found, not Mr. Sander, but a telegraphic message from him bidding me await his return.

"At what time," I asked the waiter, "arrives the next train from Cuneo?"

"At eight o'clock, signor."

I looked at the clock. It was now seven.

"There is a steamer sailing this evening for South America," I said.

"Yes, signor; with many passengers from this hotel."

"At what time?"

"At seven o'clock—even now."

A minute later I was driving down to the docks—my swimming head full of half-matured ideas of bribing some one to delay the steamer. Then came the blessed reflection that, in the absence of Misté, his confederate would certainly not depart alone. I knew enough of their tactics to feel sure that instead of taking passage in the steamer this man (who could only be a subordinate to that master in cunning who had shot me) must perforce await his chief's arrival.

Nevertheless, I bade the man drive as quickly as the vile pavement would allow,

thinking to board the steamer at all events and scrutinise the faces of her passengers. We rattled through the narrow and tortuous streets, reaching the port in time to see the last rope cast off from the great vessel as she swung round to seaward. I hurried to the pierhead, and reached the extremity of the port before the *Principe Amadeo*, which had to move with circumspection amid the shipping.

The passengers were assembled on deck, taking what many of them doubtless knew to be a last look at their native land. The lowering sun cast a glow over city and harbour, while a great silence hovered over all. The steamer came quite close to the pierhead. I could have tossed a letter on her deck.

Suddenly my heart stood still as my gaze lighted on the form of an old man who stood at the stern-rail a little apart from his fellow-passengers. He stood with his back turned towards me looking up to the lighthouse. Every line of his form, his attitude, the very locks of thin, white hair were familiar to me. This was the Vicomte de Clericy, and no other—the man whose funeral I had attended at Senneville six months ago. I did not cry out, or rub my eyes, or feel unreal, as people do in books. I knew that I was my sober self, and yonder was the Vicomte de Clericy. But I thought that the pier was moving and not the steamer, and bumped awkwardly against my neighbour, who looked at me curiously and apologised.

The old man by the stern-rail slowly turned and showed me his face—bland, benevolent, short-sighted. I can swear that it was the Vicomte de Clericy, though the world has only my word for it; that Lucille's father—dead, buried and mourned—stood on the deck of the steamer *Principe Amadeo* as she steamed out into the Gulf of Genoa on the evening of the 30th of May, 1871.

The precious moments slipped by, the great steamer glided past me. I heard the engine-room gong. The screw stirred the clear water, and I was left gazing stupidly at the receding form of my old patron as he stood with his placid hands clasped behind him.

It was some time before I left the spot; for my wounds had left me weak, and I have never had that quickness of brain which enables men to see the right course, and take it in a flash of thought.

The steamer had gone—was, indeed, now growing smaller on the horizon—and on board of her the Vicomte de Clericy. There was no gainsaying it. I had seen him with my own eyes, but why had he done this thing?

My shoulder throbbed painfully. I was sick at heart, and could not bring my mind to bear upon any one subject. The cab-driver had followed as far as he could, and now stood beckoning to me with his whip. I went back, and bade him drive me to the hotel; for I had not been in bed for three nights, and had a strong desire to get and remain there until this great fatigue should at length leave me.

Of what followed I have but a dim recollection; indeed, remember little from that time until I awoke in a bedroom at the Hôtel de Gênes and found a gentle pink and white face, surrounded by a snowy cap, bending over my bed.

"What time is it, and what day, my sister?" I asked, and was gently commanded to hold my tongue. She gave me a spoonful of something with no taste to it, without so much as asking me whether I wanted it. Indeed, this gentle person treated me as a child, as, moreover, I think women always treat such men as are wholly in their power.

"You must keep quiet," she said. "See, I will read to you!" and taking a book from her pocket read aloud the Psalms in a cunning sing-song voice that sent me to sleep.

When I awoke again the nun was still in the room, and, with her, Sander, talking the most atrocious French. A queer contrast. One of the world worldly, a moth that batten on the seamy side; the other far above the wickedness of men.

"Hush!" I heard her say. "He is awake, and must not hear of your affairs."

And she turned away from poor Sander, with his shrewd air, as from the world and the iniquity thereof.

He shrugged his shoulders and looked at her placid back, which, indeed, she gave him unceremoniously enough, with a hopeless contempt. Womanhood had earned, it appeared, his profoundest scorn as unbusinesslike and incompetent. Nunhood simply astounded him.

"Look here, my sister!" he said, plucking impatiently at her demure sleeve, and even in my semi-consciousness I smiled at the sound of the words from his cockney lips.

"Well?" she answered, turning her unruffled glance upon him.

Sander lowered his voice and talked hurriedly in her ear. But she only shook her head. How small the things of this world are to those who look with honest eyes

beyond it!

"Well, I *must* tell him—there!" exclaimed Sander, angrily, and he made a step towards the bed. But she laid her hand on his arm and held him. It was a queer picture.

"Let me go," he said. "I know best."

Her face flushed suddenly, and the nun stood before the detective.

"No," she replied quietly, "you do not know best. I am mistress here. Will you kindly go?"

She went to the door and held it open for him, her actions and words belying the meek demeanour which belongs to her calling, and which she never laid aside for a moment.

So with a hopeless mien Sander left the room, and my nurse came towards the bed.

"That," she said, softly, "is a very stupid man."

"He is not generally considered so, my sister."

She paid as little heed to my words as a nurse to the prattle of a child.

"You have moved," she said, "and this bandage is ruffled. You must try to lie quieter, for you have a nasty wound in your shoulder. I know, for I have been through the war. How came you by such a hurt now that peace has been declared?"

"The other man came by a worse one, for he is dead."

"Then the good God forgive you. But you must keep quiet. See—I will read to you."

And out came the book again in its devotional black cover. She read for a long while, but I paid no heed to her voice, nor fell under its sleepy spell. Presently she closed the pages with a pious look of reproach.

"You are not attending," she said.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I was wondering what cause you had to fall out with my agent, Mr. Sander, who is not so stupid as you think."

"He is one of those," she answered primly, "who do not know how to behave in a sick room. He foolishly wanted to talk to you of affairs—when you are not well enough. Affairs—to a sick man!"

"Who should be thinking of the affairs of another world, my sister."

"Those always should come first," she answered, with downcast eyes.

"And of what did Mr. Sander want to speak?" I asked.

She looked up with a gleam of interest. Beneath the demure bib of her professional apron there beat still a woman's heart. Sister Renée wanted to tell me the news herself.

"Oh," she answered, "it is nothing that will interest you. You are not even an Italian—only an Englishman."

"That is all, my sister."

"But all Genoa is on the housetops about it."

"Ah!"

"Yes. Never has there been so great a catastrophe; but you have no friends here, so it will not affect you."

"Therefore, I may be the more safely told. I am not affected by great catastrophes from a humane point of view."

"Well," she said, busying herself about the room with quick and noiseless movements, "but it is always terrible to hear of such a thing when one reflects that we are all so unprepared."

"For what, my sister?"

"For death," she answered, with a look of awe in the most innocent eyes in the world.

"But who is dead?"

"Three hundred people," she answered. "The passengers and crew of the *Principe Amadeo*—a large steamer that sailed last night from Genoa, with emigrants for South America."

"And all are drowned?" I asked, after a pause, thankful that my face was in the shadow of the curtain.

"All, except two of the crew. The steamer had only left the harbour an hour before, and all the passengers were at dinner. There came, I think, a fog, and in the darkness a collision occurred. The *Principe Amadeo* went down in five minutes."

She spoke quietly, and with that calm which religion, doubtless, gave her. Indeed, her only thought seemed to be that these people had passed to their account without the ministrations of the church.

She soon left me, having my promise to sleep quietly and at once. Sœur Renée, despite her grey hairs and the wrinkles that the years (for her life seemed purged of other cause) had left, was an easy victim to deception.

I did not sleep, but lay awake for many hours, turning over in my mind the events that had followed each other so quickly. And one thought came ever uppermost—namely, that in the smallest details of our existence a judgment far superior to ours must of necessity be at work. This wiser judgment I detected in the chance, as some will call it, that sent Sister Renée to me with this news. For if Sander had told me of the sinking of the *Principe Amadeo* I must assuredly, in the heat of the moment, have disclosed to him, in return, my knowledge that the Vicomte de Clericy was on board of her when she sailed from Genoa. Whereas, now that I had time to reflect, I saw clearly that this news belonged to Madame de Clericy alone, and was in nowise the business of Mr. Sander. That keen-witted man had faithfully performed the duty on which he had been employed—namely, to enable me to lay my hands on Charles Misté. One half of the money—a fortune in itself—had been recovered. There remained, therefore, nothing but to pay Mr. Sander and bid him farewell.

I was, however, compelled to await the arrival of Alphonse Giraud, who telegraphed to me that he was still in Nice. I did not know until long after that he had been formally arrested there for his participation in the chase of Misté that ended in that ill-starred miscreant's death. Nor did I learn, until months had elapsed, that my good friend John Turner had also hastened to Nice, taking thither with him a great Parisian lawyer to defend me in the trial that took place

while I lay ill at Genoa. Sister Renée, moreover, had not laid aside her womanly guile when she took the veil, for she concealed from me with perfect success that I was under guard night and day in my bedroom at the Hôtel de Gênes. What had I done to earn such true friends or deserve such faithful care?

The trial passed happily enough, and Alphonse arrived at Genoa ere I had been there a week. He had delayed little in realising with a boyish delight one of his recovered drafts for five thousand pounds. He repaid such loans as I had been able to make him, settled accounts with Sander, and greatly relieved my mind by seeing him depart. For I felt in some sort a criminal myself, and the secret, which had by the merest accident been thrust upon me, discomfited me under the keen eye of the expert.

The weather was exceedingly hot, and sickness raged unchecked in the city. A fortnight elapsed, during which Giraud was my faithful attendant. The doctor who had been called in, the first of his craft with whom I had had business, a Frenchman and a clever surgeon, restored me to a certain stage of convalescence, but could not get beyond it.

"Where do you live," he asked me one day, with a grave face, "when you are at home?"

"In Suffolk, on the east coast of England."

"Where the air is different from this."

"As different as sunrise from afternoon," I answered, with a sudden longing for the bluff, keen air of Hopton.

"Are you a good sailor?" he asked.

"I spent half my boyhood on the North Sea."

He walked to the window and stood there in deep thought.

"Then," he said at length, "go home at once by steamer from here, and stay there. Your own country will do more for you than all the doctors in Italy."



Chapter XXVIII

The Links

"La plus grande preuve d'abnégation que donne l'amitié, c'est de vivre à coté de l'amour."

Earlier in this record mention has been made—and, indeed, the reader's attention called thereto—of certain events which, in the light of subsequent knowledge, pieced themselves together like links of a chain into one complete whole.

During the quiet months that closed the year of the Commune I dwelt at Hopton, Isabella being away, and Little Corton in the care of a housekeeper. Leisure was thus afforded me for the task of piecing together these links of the past.

It was hard at first to realise that those few moments passed on the pierhead at Genoa did not form part of my illness and the dreamy memories of that time. But having always been of a matter of fact mind I allowed myself no illusions in this respect, and this strange detail of an incomprehensible life forced itself upon my understanding at length when the inexplicable became dimly legible.

In my native air I soon picked up strength, forgetting, in truth, my wounds and illness before the shooting season. Nevertheless, I throw a gun up to my shoulder less nimbly than I did before Miste's bullet found its billet among the muscles of my arm.

Madame de Clericy and Lucille had returned to Paris, but, the former wrote me, were anxious to get away from the capital, which no longer offered a pleasant home to avowed Legitimists. Madame still entrusted me with the management of her affairs, which I administered *tant bien que mal* by correspondence, and the harvest promised to be such a good one as to set our minds at rest respecting the immediate future.

Alphonse Giraud passed a few days, from time to time, with the ladies, but he being a poor correspondent, and I no better, we had but little knowledge of each other at this time.

Madame, I observed, made but brief reference to Lucille now. "Alphonse is with us," she would write, and nothing else; or "Lucille keeps well and is ever gay," with which scant details I had to content myself.

Twice she invited me to pass some days, or weeks, if it could be so arranged, at the Rue des Palmiers, and twice I refused. For in truth I scarcely wished to meet Madame de Clericy until my chain was pieced together and I could lay before her a tale of evidence that had no weak link in it.

In the month of September I journeyed to Paris, staying there but two days, and so arranging my movements that I met neither Madame de Clericy and her daughter nor Alphonse. I succeeded beyond my expectations in forging an important link.

"Perhaps, as you cannot leave your estates just now," Madame had written, "you will come to us at La Pauline towards the end of the vintage. Indeed, my friend, I must ask you to make an effort to do so, for I learn that the harvest will be a heavy one, and your judgment will be required in financial matters since you are so good as to place it at our disposal."

To this I had returned a vague answer, thinking that before that time Alphonse might have news to tell us which would alter many arrangements and a few lives. For now that he had recovered a greater part of his vast wealth there could, assuredly, be no reason for further delay in pressing his suit *auprès de* Lucille.

I had, by the way, propounded to John Turner the problem that would arise in the case of our having to conclude that Miste's confederate had perished in the ill-fated *Principe Amadeo*, taking out of this world, if he could not carry it to the next, the remainder of Giraud's fortune.

"Within five years," he answered me, "Giraud will be repaid the value of the missing drafts, for we have now a sufficient excuse to stop payment of them, assuming, as we may safely do, that the bills were lost at sea."

In the same letter my old friend imparted some news affecting myself.

"I am," he wrote, "getting on in years, and fatter. In view of these facts I have made a will leaving you, by the way, practically my heir. A man who could refuse to marry such a pretty girl as Isabella Gayerson, with such an exceedingly pretty fortune as she possesses, deserves to have money troubles; so I bequeath 'em to you."

Towards the end of September Madame again wrote to me with the information that they were installed at La Pauline for the winter, and begged me to name the day when I could visit them. With due deliberation I accepted this invitation, and wrote to Giraud in Paris that I was about to pass through that city, and would much like to see him as often as possible.

"You know, Dick," he said to me, when we had dined together at his club, "it is better fun being ruined. All this money—Mon Dieu—what a trouble it is!"

"Yes," answered I—and the words came from my heart—"it only brings ill fortune to those that have it."

Nevertheless, Alphonse Giraud was quite happy in the recovery of his wealth, and took much enjoyment in its expenditure on others. Never, surely, beat a more generous heart than Giraud's, for whom to spend his money on a friend was the greatest known happiness.

"You remember," he cried, "how we used to drink our Benedictine in claret glasses only. Ah! what it is to be young, *n'est ce pas!* and to think that we shall one day get all we want!"

His quick face darkened suddenly, and all the boyishness vanished from it.

"I have been," he said, "a famous fool—and thou art another, my grim-faced Englishman. But I have found out my folly, and discover that there is still happiness in this world—enough to go on with, at all events."

I rose to bid him good-night, for I had to make an early start the next morning.

"I only hope, mon ami," he said, taking my hand in his small fingers, "that the good God will show you soon what a fool you have been."

I arrived at Draguignan late on the following evening, and put up at the Hôtel Bertin there, than which the traveller will find no better accommodation in Provence. I had not named the hour or day of my proposed arrival at La Pauline, knowing that the affairs of Madame de Clericy might delay me in Paris, which, in fact, they did.

The next morning I set out on foot for the Chateau of La Pauline by the road passing through the vineyards and olive groves lately despoiled of their fruit. The rich hues of autumn were creeping up the mountains, where the cool air of the upper slopes preserved the verdure longer than in the sunburnt valley. The air was light and fresh, with a brisk breeze from the west. The world seemed instinct with fruition and the gathering of that which had been sown with toil and carefulness. Is it the world that fits itself to our humour, or does the Creator mould our thoughts with wind and sky, light and shade?

As I neared the Chateau my heart sank within me, for I had but evil news for the lady whom I respected above all women, save one—and how would Madame take my tidings? It seemed best to ask her to speak to me alone, for much that I had to relate was surely for the wife's ear, and would need to be tempered to the

daughter's hearing. This expedient was, however, spared me, for as I approached the old Chateau I noted the presence of some one in the trellis-covered summerhouse at the eastern end of the terrace, and caught the flutter of what seemed to be a white handkerchief. It was, I soon perceived, Madame at her lace-work—and alone.

Leaving the road I took a path through the olive groves and came upon Madame, not however by surprise, for she saw me approaching and laid aside her work.

"So you have come at last," she said, holding out her kind hand.

We went into the vine-grown hut and sat down, Madame looking at me with deep speculation.

"You are a strong man, mon ami," she said. "For one sees no signs in your face of what you have gone through."

But it was not of myself that I had come to talk. The tale had to be told to Madame de Clericy, and being a plain-spoken Englishman and no hero of a book, I purposed telling it briefly without allegory or symbol.

"Madame," I said, "it was not Miste who took the money. It was not the Baron Giraud that we buried from the Rue des Palmiers. It was not the Vicomte de Clericy that we found in the Seine near Passy and laid to earth in the churchyard at Senneville."

And I saw that the Vicomtesse thought me mad.

"My poor friend," she said, with the deepest pity in her voice, "why do you talk like that, and what do you mean?"

THE VICOMTESSE TURNED A LITTLE IN HER CHAIR, AND, LEANING
HER ELBOW ON THE TABLE, SHOWED ME ONLY HER PROFILE AS
SHE SAT, WITH HER CHIN IN THE PALM OF HER HAND, LOOKING
DOWN INTO THE VALLEY.

THE VICOMTESSE TURNED A LITTLE IN HER CHAIR, AND, LEANING HER ELBOW ON
THE TABLE, SHOWED ME ONLY HER PROFILE AS SHE SAT, WITH HER CHIN IN THE
PALM OF HER HAND, LOOKING DOWN INTO THE VALLEY.

"I only mean, Madame, that no man is safe in temptation, and that money is the greatest of all. I would not trust myself with ten million francs. I would not now trust any man on earth."

"Why?"

And I thought that in Madame's eyes there was already the light of understanding. For a moment I paused, and she said quickly:

"Is my husband alive?"

"No, Madame."

The Vicomtesse turned a little in her chair, and, leaning her elbow on the table, showed me only her profile as she sat, with her chin in the palm of her hand, looking down into the valley.

"Tell me all you know," she said. "I will not interrupt you; but do not pity me."

"The Baron Giraud did my old patron a great wrong when, in his selfish fear, he placed that great fortune in his care. For it appears that no man may trust himself where money is concerned, and no other has a right to tempt him. So far as we can judge, the Vicomte had all that he could want. I know he had more money than he cared to spend. You are aware, Madame, that I had the greatest respect and admiration for your husband. During the months that we were in daily intercourse he endeared himself to me by a hundred kindnesses, a thousand tokens of what I hope was affection."

Madame nodded briefly, and I hastened on with my narrative, for suspense is the keenest arrow in the quiver of human suffering.

"What I have learnt has been gathered with the greatest care from many sources, and what I now tell you is neither known nor suspected by any other on earth. If you so desire, the knowledge can well remain the property of two persons only."

"My friend," Madame said on the impulse of the kindest heart in the world, "I think your strength lies in the depth of your thought for others."

"The Vicomte was tempted," I went on. "He had in his nature a latent love of money. The same is in many natures, but the majority have never the opportunity of gratifying it. He did what ninety-nine out of a hundred other men would have done—what I think I should have done myself. He yielded. He had at hand a ready tool and the cleverest aid in Charles Miste, who actually carried the money, but for some reason—possibly because he was unable to forge the necessary signatures—could not obtain the cash for the drafts without the Vicomte's assistance. Unconsciously, I repeatedly prevented their meeting, and

thus frustrated the design."

All the while Madame sat and looked down into the valley. Her self-command was infinite, for she must have had a thousand questions to ask.

"It was, I think, my patron's intention to go to the New World with his great wealth and there begin life afresh—this, however, is one of the details that must ever remain incomprehensible. Possibly when the temptation gripped him he ceased to reflect at all—else he must assuredly have recognised all that he was sacrificing for the mere possession of money that he could never live to spend. Men usually pay too high a price for their desires. In order to carry out his scheme he conceived and accomplished—with a strange cunning, which develops, I am told, after crime—a clever ruse."

Madame turned and looked at me for a moment.

"We must think of him, Madame," I explained, "as one suffering from a mental disease; for the love of money in its acute stages is nothing else, lacking, as it assuredly does, common sense. The most singular part of his mental condition was the rapidity and skill with which he turned events to his own advantage, and seized each opportunity for the furtherance of his ends. The Baron Giraud died at the Hôtel Clericy—here was a chance. The Vicomte, with a cunning which was surely unnatural—you remember his strange behaviour at that time, how he locked himself in his study for hours together—took therefore the Baron's body from the coffin, dressed it in his own garments, placed in the clothing his own purse, and pocket-book, and cast the body into the Seine. I have had the coffin that we laid in Père la Chaise exhumed and opened. It contained only old books from the upper shelves in the study in the Rue des Palmiers. The Vicomte must have packed it thus when he took the Baron's body—doubtless with Mist'e's clever aid—and threw it into the river for us to find and identify."

"Yes," said Madame, slowly, "he was cleverer than any suspected. I knew that."

"The body," I went on, for my tale was nearly done, "which we found at Passy and buried at Senneville was undoubtedly that of the Baron Giraud. This, however, is the only detail of my story which I am unable to assert as a positive fact."

"Of the rest you have no doubt?" Madame asked, slowly. And I shook my head.

"Is it not possible," she suggested, with that quiet sureness of judgment which, I

think, is rarely given to women, "that Miste is alone responsible and the criminal? Of course, I cannot explain the Baron Giraud's disappearance—but it is surely possible that Miste may have murdered the Vicomte and thrown his body into the Seine."

"No, Madame, there has been no murder done."

"You are sure?"

"I have, since the war, seen the Vicomte alive and well."

Chapter XXIX

At La Pauline

"Le plus lent à promettre est toujours le plus fidèle à tenir."

The tale was thus told to her whom it most concerned, clearly and without reservation. The details are, however, known to the patient reader, and call for no recapitulation here. When Madame de Clericy heard the end of it—namely, the sad fate of the unfortunate *Principe Amadeo* and all, save two, on board that steamer—she sat in silence for some moments, and indeed made no comment at any other time. Assuredly none was needed, nor could any human words add to or detract from that infallible Divine judgment which had so ruled our lives.

For when one who is dear to us has forfeited our love by one of those great and sorrowful alterations of the mind, scarce amounting to madness, and yet near akin to it, which, alas! are frequently enough brought about by temptation or an insufficient self control—surely, then, it is only Heaven's kindness that takes from us the erring one and leaves but a brief memory of his fall. Has not a great writer said that a dead sorrow is better than a living one?

I rose to my feet and stood for a moment in the doorway of the summerhouse, intending to leave Madame with her dead grief. But as I crossed the threshold her quiet voice arrested me.

"Mon ami!" she said, and, as I paused without looking round, presently went on—well pleased, perhaps, that I should not see her face.

"One mistake you make in the kindness of your heart, for you are a stern man with a soft heart, as many English are—you grieve too much for me. Of course, it is a sorrow—but it is not the great sorrow. You understand?"

"I think so."

"That came to me many years ago, and was not connected with the Vicomte de Clericy, but with one who had no title beyond that of gentleman—and I think there is none higher. It is an old story, and one that is too often enacted in France, where convenience is placed before happiness and money above affection. My

life has been, well—happy. Lucille has made it so. And I have an aim in existence which is in itself a happiness—to make Lucille's life a happy one, to ensure her that which I have missed, and to avoid a mistake made by generation after generation of women—namely, to believe that love comes to us after marriage. It never does so, my friend—never. Tolerance may come, or, at the best, affection—which is making an ornament of brass and setting it up where there should be gold—or nothing."

I stood, half turning my back to Madame, looking down into the valley—not caring to meet the quiet eyes that had looked straight into my heart long ago in the room called the boudoir of the house in the Rue des Palmiers, and had ever since read the thoughts and desires which I had hidden from the rest of the world. Madame knew, without any words of mine, that I also had one object in existence, and that the same as hers—namely, that Lucille's life should be a happy one.

"There is no task so difficult," said Madame, half talking, as I thought, to herself, "unless it be undertaken by the one man who can do it without an effort—no task so difficult as that of making a woman happy. Even her mother cannot be sure of the wisdom of interference. I always remember some words of your friend, John Turner, 'When in doubt, do nothing,' and he is a wise man, I think."

The Vicomtesse was an economist of words, and explained herself no further. We remained for some moments in silence, and it was she who at length broke it.

"Thank you," she said, "for all your thought and care in verifying the details of the story you have told me."

"I might have kept it from you, Madame," answered I, "and thus spared you some sorrow. Perhaps you had been happier in ignorance."

"I think, my dear friend, I am better knowing it. Shall we tell Lucille?"

I turned and looked at Madame, whose manner bespoke my attention. There was more in the words than a single question—indeed, I thought there were many questions.

"That shall be as you decide."

"I ask your opinion, mon ami?"

"I am not in favour of keeping any secrets from Mademoiselle."

For a time Madame seemed lost in thought.

"If you go to the chateau," she said at length, taking up her lace-work as she spoke, "you will find Lucille either in the garden or the chapel, where she daily tends the flowers. Tell her anything—you please."

I left Madame and walked slowly across the garden. Lucille was not among the gay flower-borders. I passed by the old sun-dial and into the shade of the trees that stood by the moat, where the frogs chattered incessantly in the cool shadows. I never hear the sound now but something stirs in my breast, which is not regret nor yet entire happiness, but that strange blending of the two which is far above the mere earthly understanding of the latter state.

In the shadow of the cypress trees I approached the chapel quietly, of which the door and windows were alike thrown open. Standing in the cool shadow of the porch I saw that Lucille was not busy with the flowers, but having completed her task, knelt for a moment before the altar, raising to heaven a face surely as pure as that of any angel there.

I sat down in the porch to wait.

Presently Lucille rose from her knees and turning came towards me. I thought, as I always did on seeing her after an absence short or long, that I had never really loved her until that moment.

I looked for some expression of surprise in her eyes, but it seemed that she must have known who had entered before she turned. Instead I saw in her face a strange new tenderness that set my heart beating. She gave me her hand with a gesture of shyness that was likewise unknown to me.

"Why do you look at me like that?" she asked, sharply.

"I was wondering what your thought was as you came towards me, Mademoiselle."

"Ah!" she answered, with a shake of the head.

"ME VOILÀ, IF YOU WANT ME"
"ME VOILÀ, IF YOU WANT ME"

"It could not have been that you were glad to see me here? Yet, one would almost have thought—"

She broke into a light laugh.

"It is so easy to think wrong," she said.

I had sat down again, hoping that she would do the same; but she remained standing a few yards away from me, her shoulder against the grey old wall of the porch. She was looking out into the shadow of the trees, and to be near her was a greater happiness than I can tell.

"Do you find it easy to think wrong, Mademoiselle?"

"Yes," she answered, gently.

"And I also."

We remained silent for a few minutes, and the chatter of the frogs in the moat sounded pleasant and peaceful.

"What have you thought that was wrong?" asked Lucille at length.

"I thought that you loved Alphonse Giraud, and would marry him."

Lucille stood and never looked at me.

"Was I wrong, Mademoiselle?"

"Yes—and I told Alphonse so from the beginning, but he did not believe me until lately."

"I thought it was he," I said.

"No—nor any like him. If ever I did—either of those things—it would need to be a man—one of strong will who would be master, not only of me, but of men; one whom I should always think wiser and stronger and braver than any other."

I looked at her, and saw nothing but her profile and the gleam of a sun-ray on her hair.

"Am I a man, Mademoiselle?"

There was a silence, a long one, I thought it.

"Yes," she answered at last, barely audible; and as she spoke stepped out into the broken shade of the cypress trees. She went a few paces away from me—then came slowly back and stood before me. Her face was quite colourless, but there

was that in her eyes that brings heaven down to earth.

"*Me voilà*," she said, with a queer little gesture of self-abandonment. "*Me voilà*, if you want me."

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