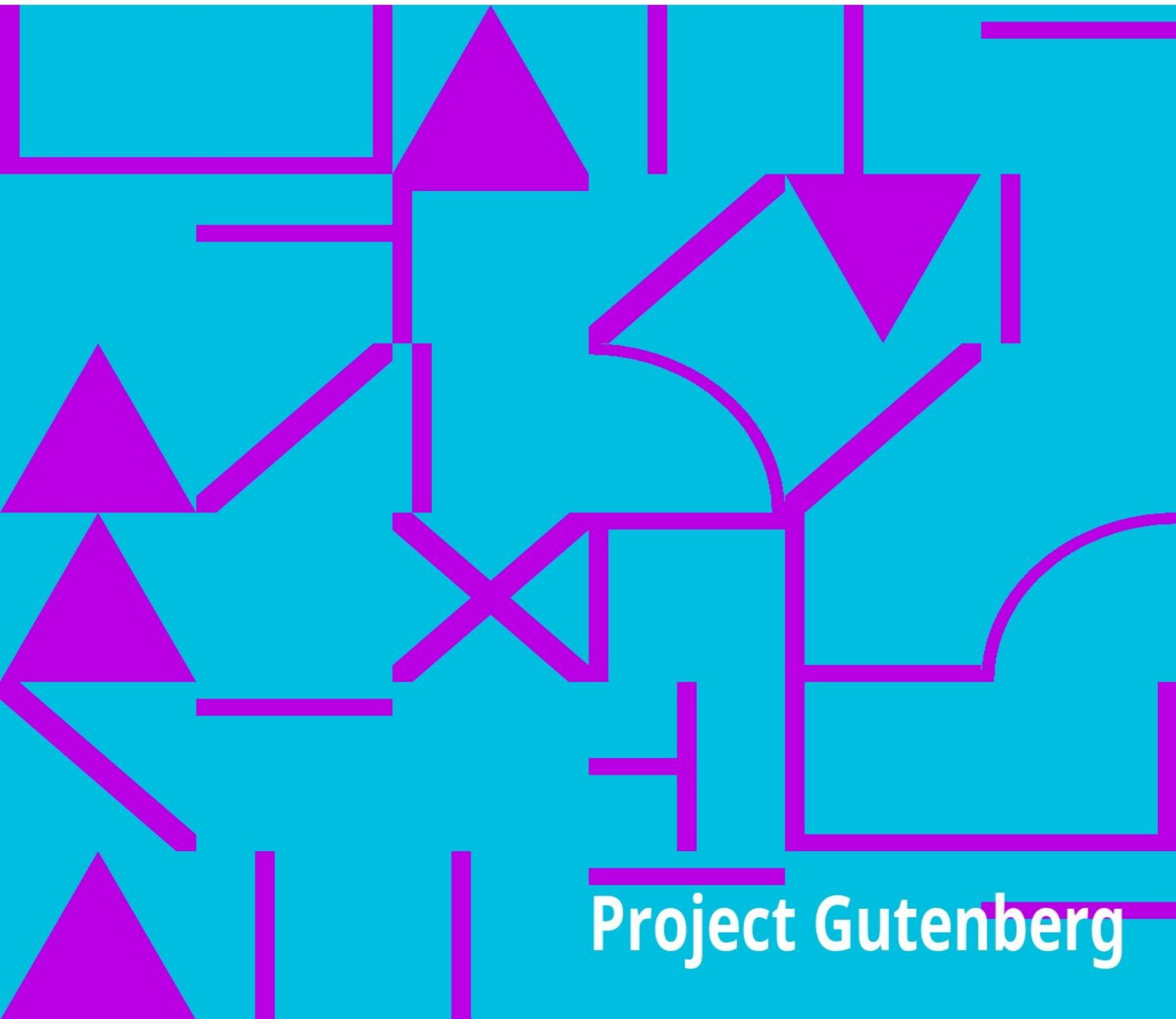


L'Abbe Constantin — Volume 3

Ludovic Halévy



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THE ABBE CONSTANTIN

By LUDOVIC HALEVY

BOOK 3.

CHAPTER VII

CONFIDENCES

The next morning, on returning from drill, Jean found Paul de Lavardens waiting for him at the barracks; he scarcely allowed him time to dismount, and the moment he had him alone:

"Quick," said he, "describe your, dinner-party of yesterday. I saw them myself in the morning; the little one was driving four ponies, and with an amount of audacity! I bowed to them; did they mention me? Did they recognize me? When will you take me to Longueval? Answer me."

"Answer? Yes. But which question first?"

"The last."

"When shall I take you to Longueval?"

"Yes."

"Well, in ten days; they don't want to see any one just now."

"Then you are not going back to Longueval for ten days?"

"Oh, I shall go back to-day at four o'clock. But I don't count, you know. Jean Reynaud, the Cure's godson. That is why I have penetrated so easily into the confidence of these two charming women. I have presented myself under the patronage and with the guarantee of the Church. And then they have discovered that I could render them little services. I know the country very well, and they will make use of me as a guide. In a word, I am nobody; while you, Count Paul de Lavardens, you are somebody; so fear nothing, your turn will come with the fetes and balls. Then you will be resplendent in all your glory, and I shall return very humbly into my obscurity."

"You may laugh at me as much as you like; it is none the less true that during those ten days you will steal a march upon me—upon me!"

"How upon you?"

"Now, Jean, do you want to make me believe that you are not already in love with one of these two women? Is it possible? So much beauty, so much luxury. Luxury to that degree upsets me. Those black ponies with their white rosettes! I dreamed of them last night, and that little- Bettina, is it not?"

"Yes, Bettina."

"Bettina—Countess Bettina de Lavardens! Doesn't that sound well enough! and what a perfect husband she would have in me! To be the husband of a woman possessing boundless wealth, that is my destiny. It is not so easy as one may suppose. I have already run through something, and—if my mother had not stopped me! but I am quite ready to begin again. Oh, how happy that girl would be with me! I would create around her the existence of a fairy queen. In all her luxury she would feel the taste, the art, and the skill of her husband. I would pass my life in adoring her, in displaying her beauty, in petting her, in bearing her triumphant through the world. I would study her beauty in order to give it the frame that best suited it. 'If he were not there,' she would say, 'I should not be so beautiful, so dazzling.' I should know not only how to love her, but how to amuse her. She would have something for her money, she would have love and pleasure. Come, Jean, do a good action, take me to Mrs. Scott's to-day."

"I cannot, I assure you."

"Well, then, in ten days; but I give you fair notice, I shall install myself at Longueval, and shall not move. In the first place it would please my mother; she is still a little prejudiced against the Americans. She says that she shall arrange not to see them, but I know my mother. Some day, when I shall go home in the evening and tell her: 'Mother, I have won the-heart of a charming little person who is burdened with a capital of twenty millions—they exaggerate when they talk of hundreds of millions. You know these are the correct figures, and they are enough for me. That evening, then, my mother will be delighted, because, in her heart, what is it she desires for me? What all good mothers desire for their sons—a good marriage, or a discreet liaison with some one in society. At Longueval I find these two essentials, and I will accommodate myself very willingly to either. You will have the kindness to warn me in ten days—you will let me know which of the two you abandon to me, Mrs. Scott or Miss Percival?'"

"You are mad, you are quite mad! I do not, I never shall think—"

"Listen, Jean. You are wisdom personified; you may say and do as you like, but remember what I say to you, Jean, you will fall in love in that house."

"I do not believe it," replied Jean, laughing.

"But I am absolutely sure of it. Good-by. I leave you to your duties."

That morning Jean was perfectly sincere. He had slept very well the previous night; the second interview with the two sisters had, as if by enchantment, dissipated the slight trouble which had agitated his soul after the first meeting. He prepared to meet them again with much pleasure, but also with much tranquillity; there was too much money in that house to permit the love of a poor devil like Jean to find place honestly there.

Friendship was another affair; with all his heart he wished, and with all his strength he sought, to establish himself peacefully in the esteem and regard of the sisters. He would try not to remark too much the beauty of Susie and Bettina; he would try not to forget himself as he had done the previous evening, in the contemplation of the four little feet resting on their footstools. They had said, very frankly, very cordially, to him: "You shall be our friend." That was all he desired—to be their friend—and that he would be.

During the ten days that followed, all conducted to the success of this enterprise. Susie, Bettina, the Cure, and Jean led the same life in the closest and most cordial intimacy.

Jean did not seek to analyze his feelings. He felt for these two women an equal affection; he was perfectly happy, perfectly tranquil. Then he was not in love, for love and tranquillity seldom dwell at peace in the same heart.

Jean, however, saw approach, with a little anxiety and sadness, the day which would bring to Longueval the Turners, and the Nortons, and the whole force of the American colony. The day came too soon.

On Friday, the 24th of June, at four o'clock, Jean arrived at the castle. Bettina received him alone, looking quite vexed.

"How annoying it is," said she, "my sister is not well; a little headache, nothing of consequence, it will be gone by tomorrow; but I dare not ride with you alone. In America I might; but here, it would not do, would it?"

"Certainly not," replied Jean.

"I must send you back, and I am so sorry."

"And so am I—I am very sorry to be obliged to go, and to lose this last day, which I had hoped to pass with you. However, since it must be, I will come tomorrow to inquire after your sister."

"She will see you herself, to-morrow; I repeat it is nothing serious. But do not run away in such a hurry, pray; will you not spare me a little quarter of an hour's conversation? I want to speak to you; sit down there, and now listen to me well. My sister and I had intended this evening, after dinner, to blockade you into a little corner of the drawing-room, and then she meant to tell you what I am going to try to say for us both."

"But I am a little nervous. Do not laugh; it is a very serious matter. We wish to thank you for having been, ever since our arrival here, so good to us both."

"Oh, Miss Percival, pray, it is I who—"

"Oh, do not interrupt me, you will quite confuse me. I do not know how to get

through with it. I maintain, besides, that the thanks are due from us, not from you. We arrived here two strangers. We have been fortunate enough immediately to find friends. Yes, friends. You have taken us by the hand, you have led us to our farmers, to our keepers; while your godfather took us to his poor—and everywhere you were so much beloved that from their confidence in you, they began, on your recommendation, to like us a little. You are adored about here; do you know that?"

"I was born here—all these good people have known me from my infancy, and are grateful to me for what my grandfather and father did for them; and then I am of their race, the race of the peasants; my great-grandfather was a laborer at Bargecourt, a village two miles from here."

"Oh! oh! you appear very proud of that!"

"Neither proud nor ashamed."

"I beg your pardon, you made a little movement of pride. Well, I can tell you that my mother's great-grandfather was a farmer in Brittany. He went to Canada at the end of the last century, when Canada was still French. And you love very much this place where you were born?"

"Very much. Perhaps I shall soon be obliged to leave it."

"Why?"

"When I get promotion, I shall have to exchange into another regiment, and I shall wander from garrison to garrison; but certainly, when I am an old commandant or old colonel, on half-pay, I shall come back, and live and die here, in the little house that was my father's."

"Always quite alone?"

"Why quite alone? I certainly hope not."

"You intend to marry?"

"Yes, certainly."

"You are trying to marry?"

"No; one may think of marrying, but one ought not to try to marry."

"And yet there are people who do try. Come, I can answer for that, and you even; people have wished to marry you."

"How do you know that?"

"Oh! I know all your little affairs so well; you are what they call a good match, and I repeat it, they have wished to marry you."

"Who told you that?"

"Monsieur le Cure."

"Then he was very wrong," said Jean, with a certain sharpness.

"No, no, he was not wrong. If any one has been to blame it is I. I soon discovered that your godfather was never so happy as when he was speaking of you. So when I was alone with him during our walks, to please him I talked of you, and he related your history to me. You are well off; you are very well off; from Government you receive every month two hundred and thirteen francs and some centimes; am I correct?"

"Yes," said Jean, deciding to bear with a good grace his share in the Cure's indiscretions.

"You have eight thousand francs' income?"

"Nearly, not quite."

"Add to that your house, which is worth thirty thousand francs. You are in an excellent position, and people have asked your hand."

"Asked my hand! No, no."

"They have, they have, twice, and you have refused two very good marriages, two very good fortunes, if you prefer it—it is the same thing for so many people. Two hundred thousand francs in the one, three hundred thousand in the other case. It appears that these fortunes are enormous for the country! Yet you have refused! Tell me why."

"Well, it concerned two charming young girls."

"That is understood. One always says that."

"But whom I scarcely knew. They forced me—for I did resist—they forced me to spend two or three evenings with them last winter."

"And then?"

"Then—I don't quite know how to explain it to you. I did not feel the slightest touch of embarrassment, emotion, anxiety, or disturbance—"

"In fact," said Bettina, resolutely, "not the least suspicion of love."

"No, not the least, and I returned quite calmly to my bachelor den, for I think it is better not to marry than to marry without love."

"And I think so, too."

She looked at him, he looked at her, and suddenly, to the great surprise of both, they found nothing more to say, nothing at all.

At this moment Harry and Bella rushed into the room, with cries of joy.

"Monsieur Jean! Are you there? Come and see our ponies!"

"Ah!" said Bettina, her voice a little uncertain, "Edwards has just come back from Paris, and has brought two microscopic ponies for the children. Let us go to see them, shall we?"

They went to see the ponies, which were indeed worthy to figure in the stables of the King of Lilliput.

CHAPTER VIII

ANOTHER MARTYR TO MILLIONS

Three weeks have glided by; another day and Jean will be obliged to leave with his regiment for the artillery practice. He will lead the life of a soldier. Ten days' march on the highroad going and returning, and ten days in the camp at Cercottes in the forest of Orleans. The regiment will return to Souvigny on the 10th of August.

Jean is no longer tranquil; Jean is no longer happy. He sees approach with impatience, and at the same time with terror, the moment of his departure. With impatience—for he suffers an absolute martyrdom, he longs to escape from it; with terror—for to pass twenty days without seeing her, without speaking to her, without her in a word—what will become of him? Her! It is Bettina; he adores her!

Since when? Since the first day, since that meeting in the month of May in the Cure's garden. That is the truth; but Jean struggles against and resists that truth. He believes that he has only loved Bettina since the day when the two chatted gayly, amicably, in the little drawing-room. She was sitting on the blue couch near the widow, and, while talking, amused herself with repairing the disorder of the dress of a Japanese princess, one of Bella's dolls, which she had left on a chair, and which Bettina had mechanically taken up.

Why had the fancy come to Miss Percival to talk to him of those two young girls whom he might have married? The question of itself was not at all embarrassing to him. He had replied that, if he had not then felt any taste for marriage, it was because his interviews with these two girls had not caused him any emotion or any agitation. He had smiled in speaking thus, but a few minutes after he smiled no more. This emotion, this agitation, he had suddenly learned to know them. Jean did not deceive himself; he acknowledged the depth of the wound; it had penetrated to his very heart's core.

Jean, however, did not abandon himself to this emotion. He said to himself:

"Yes, it is serious, very serious, but I shall recover from it."

He sought an excuse for his madness; he laid the blame on circumstances. For ten days this delightful girl had been too much with him, too much with him alone! How could he resist such a temptation? He was intoxicated with her charm, with her grace and beauty. But the next day a troop of visitors would arrive at Longueval, and there would be an end of this dangerous intimacy. He would have courage; he would keep at a distance; he would lose himself in the crowd, would see Bettina less often and less familiarly. To see her no more was a thought he could not support! He wished to remain Bettina's friend, since he could be nothing but her friend; for there was another thought which scarcely entered the mind of Jean. This thought did not appear extravagant to him; it appeared monstrous. In the whole world there was not a more honorable man than Jean, and he felt for Bettina's money horror, positively horror.

From the 25th of June the crowd had been in possession of Longueval. Mrs. Norton arrived with her son, Daniel Norton; and Mrs. Turner with her son, Philip Turner. Both of them, the young Philip and the young Daniel, formed a part of the famous brotherhood of the thirty-four. They were old friends, Bettina had treated them as such, and had declared to them, with perfect frankness, that they were losing their time. However, they were not discouraged, and formed the centre of a little court which was always very eager and assiduous around Bettina.

Paul de Lavardens had made his appearance on this scene, and had very rapidly become everybody's friend. He had received the brilliant and complicated education of a young man destined for pleasure. As soon as it was a question only of amusement, riding, croquet, lawn-tennis, polo, dancing, charades, and theatricals, he was ready for everything. He excelled in everything. His superiority was evident, unquestionable. Paul became, in a short time, by general consent, the director and organizer of the fetes at Longueval.

Bettina had not a moment of hesitation. Jean introduced Paul de Lavardens, and the latter had scarcely concluded the customary little compliment when Miss Percival, leaning toward her sister, whispered in her ear:

"The thirty-fifth!"

However, she received Paul very kindly, so kindly that for several days he had the weakness to misunderstand her. He believed that it was his personal graces which had obtained for him this very flattering and cordial reception. It was a great mistake. Paul de Lavardens had been introduced by Jean; he was the friend of Jean. In Bettina's eyes, therein lay all his merit.

Mrs. Scott's castle was open house; people were not invited for one evening only, but for every evening, and Paul, with enthusiasm, came every evening! His dream was at last realized; he had, found Paris at Longueval.

But Paul was neither blind nor a fool. No doubt he was, on Miss Percival's part, the object of very particular attention and favor. It pleased her to talk long, very long, alone with him. But what was the eternal, the inexhaustible subject of their conversations? Jean, again Jean, and always Jean!

Paul was thoughtless, dissipated, frivolous, but he became in earnest when Jean was in question; he knew how to appreciate him, he knew how to love him. Nothing to him was sweeter, nothing was easier, than to say of the friend of his childhood all the good that he thought of him, and as he saw that Bettina listened with great pleasure, Paul gave free rein to his eloquence.

Only—and he was quite right—Paul wished one evening to reap the benefit of his chivalrous conduct. He had just been talking for a quarter of an hour with Bettina. The conversation finished, he went to look for Jean at the other end of the drawing-room, and said to him:

"You left the field open to me, and I have made a bold stroke for Miss Percival."

"Well, you have no reason to be discontented with the result of the enterprise. You are the best friends in the world."

"Yes, certainly, pretty well, but not quite satisfactory. There is nothing more amiable or more charming than Miss Percival, and really it is very good of me to acknowledge it; for, between ourselves, she makes me play an ungrateful and ridiculous role, a role which is quite unsuited to my age. I am, you will admit, of the lover's age, and not of that of the confidant."

"Of the confidant!"

"Yes, my dear fellow, of the confidant! That is my occupation in this house. You were looking at us just now. Oh, I have very good eyes; you were looking at us. Well, do you know what we were talking about? Of you, my dear fellow, of you, of you again, of nothing but you. And it is the same thing every evening; there is no end to the questions:

"'You were brought up together? You took lessons together from the Abbe Constantin?'

"'Will he soon be Captain? And then?'

"'Commandant.'

"'And then?'

"'Colonel, etc., etc., etc.'

"Ah! I can tell you, my friend Jean, if you liked, you might dream a very delicious dream."

Jean was annoyed, almost angry. Paul was much astonished at this sudden attack of irritability.

"What is the matter? Have I said anything—"

"I beg your pardon; I was wrong. But how could you take such an absurd idea into your head?"

"Absurd! I don't see it. I have entertained the absurd idea on my own account."

"Ah! you—"

"Why 'Ah! you?' If I have had it you may have it; you are better worth it than I am."

"Paul, I entreat you!"

Jean's discomfort was evident.

"We will not speak of it again; we will not speak of it again. What I wanted to say, in short, is that Miss Percival perhaps thinks I am agreeable; but as to

considering me seriously, that little person will never commit such a folly. I must fall back upon Mrs. Scott, but without much confidence. You see, Jean, I shall amuse myself in this house, but I shall make nothing out of it."

Paul de Lavardens did fall back upon Mrs. Scott, but the next day was surprised to stumble upon Jean, who had taken to placing himself very regularly in Mrs. Scott's particular circle, for like Bettina she had also her little court. But what Jean sought there was a protection, a shelter, a refuge.

The day of that memorable conversation on marriage without love, Bettina had also, for the first time, felt suddenly awake in her that necessity of loving which sleeps, but not very profoundly, in the hearts of all young girls. The sensation had been the same, at the same moment, in the soul of Bettina and the soul of Jean. He, terrified, had cast it violently from him. She, on the contrary, had yielded, in all the simplicity of her perfect innocence, to this flood of emotion and of tenderness.

She had waited for love. Could this be love? The man who was to be her thought, her life, her soul—could this be he—this Jean? Why not? She knew him better than she knew all those who, during the past year, had haunted her for her fortune, and in what she knew of him there was nothing to discourage the love of a good girl. Far from it!

Both of them did well; both of them were in the way of duty and of truth—she, in yielding; he, in resisting; she, in not thinking for a moment of the obscurity of Jean; he, in recoiling before her mountain of wealth as he would have recoiled before a crime; she, in thinking that she had no right to parley with love; he, in thinking he had no right to parley with honor.

This is why, in proportion as Bettina showed herself more tender, and abandoned herself with more frankness to the first call of love—this is why Jean became, day by day, more gloomy and more restless. He was not only afraid of loving; he was afraid of being loved.

He ought to have remained away; he should not have come near her. He had tried; he could not; the temptation was too strong; it carried him away; so he came. She would come to him, her hands extended, a smile on her lips, and her heart in her eyes. Everything in her said:

"Let us try to love each other, and if we can love, we will!"

Fear seized him. Those two hands which offered themselves to the pressure of his hands, he hardly dared touch them. He tried to escape those eyes which, tender and smiling, anxious and curious, tried to meet his eyes. He trembled before the necessity of speaking to Bettina, before the necessity of listening to her.

It was then that Jean took refuge with Mrs. Scott, and it was then that Mrs. Scott gathered those uncertain, agitated, troubled words which were not addressed to her, and which she took for herself, nevertheless. It would have been difficult not to be mistaken.

For of these still vague and confused sentiments which agitated her, Bettina had as yet said nothing. She guarded and caressed the secret of her budding love, as a miser guards and caresses the first coins of his treasure. The day when she should see clearly into her own heart; the day that she should be sure that she loved—ah! she would speak that day, and how happy she should be to tell all to Susie!

Mrs. Scott had ended by attributing to herself this melancholy of Jean, which, day by day, took a more marked character. She was flattered by it—a woman is never displeased at thinking herself beloved—and vexed at the same time. She held Jean in great esteem, in great affection; but she was greatly distressed at the thought that if he were sad and unhappy, it was because of her.

Susie was, besides, conscious of her own innocence. With others she had sometimes been coquettish, very coquettish. To torment them a little, was that such a great crime? They had nothing to do, they were good-for-nothing, it occupied them while it amused her. It helped them to pass their time, and it helped her, too. But Susie had not to reproach herself for having flirted with Jean. She recognized his merit and his superiority; he was worth more than the others, he was a man to suffer seriously, and that was what Mrs. Scott did not wish. Already, two or three times, she had been on the point of speaking to him very seriously, very affectionately, but she had reflected Jean was going away for three weeks; on his return, if it were still necessary, she would read him a lecture, and would act in such a manner that love should not come and foolishly interfere in their friendship.

So Jean was to go the next day. Bettina had insisted that he should spend this last day at Longueval, and dine at the house. Jean had refused, alleging that he had

much to do the night before his departure.

He arrived in the evening, about half-past ten; he came on foot. Several times on the way he had been inclined to return.

"If I had courage enough," he said to himself, "I would not see her again. I shall leave to-morrow, and return no more to Souvigny while she is there. My resolution is taken, and taken forever."

But he continued his way, he would see her again—for the last time.

As soon as he entered the drawing-room, Bettina hastened to him.

"It is you at last! How late you are!"

"I have been very busy."

"And you are going to-morrow?"

"Yes, to-morrow."

"Early?"

"At five in the morning."

"You will go by the road which runs by the wall of the park, and goes through the village?"

"Yes, that is the way we shall go."

"Why so early in the morning? I would have gone out on the terrace to see you pass, and to wish you good-by."

Bettina detained for a moment Jean's burning hand in hers. He drew it mournfully away, with an effort.

"I must go and speak to your sister," said he.

"Directly, she has not seen you, there are a dozen persons round her. Come and sit here a little while, near me."

He was obliged to seat himself beside her.

"We are going away, too," said she.

"You!"

"Yes. An hour ago, we received a telegram from my brother-in-law, which has caused us great joy. We did not expect him for a month, but he is coming back in a fortnight. He will embark the day after to-morrow at New York, on board the Labrador. We are going to meet him at Havre. We shall also start the day after to-morrow; we are going to take the children, it will do them a great deal of good to spend a few days at the seaside. How pleased my brother-in-law will be to know you—he knows you already, we have spoken of you in all our letters. I am sure you and Mr. Scott will get on extremely well together, he is so good. How long shall you stay away?"

"Three weeks."

"Three weeks in a camp?"

"Yes, Miss Percival, in the camp of Cercottes."

"In the middle of the forest of Orleans. I made your godfather explain all about it to me this morning. Of course I am delighted to go to meet my brother-in-law; but at the same time, I am a little sorry to leave here, for I should have gone every morning to pay a little visit to Monsieur l'Abbe. He would have given me news of you. Perhaps, in about ten days, you will write to my sister—a little note of three or four lines—it will not take much of your time—just to tell her how you are, and that you do not forget us."

"Oh, as to forgetting you, as to losing the remembrance of your extreme kindness, your goodness, never, Miss Percival, never!"

His voice trembled, he was afraid of his own emotion, he rose.

"I assure you, Miss Percival, I must go and speak to your sister. She is looking at me. She must be astonished."

He crossed the room, Bettina followed him with her eyes.

Mrs. Norton had just placed herself at the piano to play a waltz for the young people.

Paul de Lavardens approached Miss Percival.

"Will you do me the honor, Miss Percival?"

"I believe I have just promised this dance to Monsieur Jean," she replied.

"Well, if not to him, will you give it to me?"

"That is understood."

Bettina walked toward Jean, who had seated himself near Mrs. Scott.

"I have just told a dreadful story," said she. "Monsieur de Lavardens has asked me for this dance, and I replied that I had promised it to you. You would like it, wouldn't you?"

To hold her in his arms, to breathe the perfume of her hair—Jean felt his courage could not support this ordeal, he dared not accept.

"I regret extremely I can not, I am not well tonight; I persisted in coming because I would not leave without wishing you good-by, but dance, no, it is impossible!"

Mrs. Norton began the prelude of the waltz.

"Well," said Paul, coming up quite joyful, "who is it to be, he or I?"

"You," she said, sadly, without removing her eyes from Jean.

She was much disturbed, and replied without knowing well what she said. She immediately regretted having accepted, she would have liked to stay there, near him. But it was too late, Paul took her hand and led her away.

Jean rose; he looked at the two, Bettina and Paul, a haze floated before his eyes, he suffered cruelly.

"There is only one thing I can do," thought he, "profit by this waltz, and go. Tomorrow I will write a few lines to Mrs. Scott to excuse myself."

He gained the door, he looked no more at Bettina; had he looked, he would have stayed.

But Bettina looked at him; and all at once she said to Paul:

"Thank you very much, but I am a little tired, let us stop, please. You will excuse me, will you not?"

Paul offered his arm.

"No, thank you," said she.

The door was just closing, Jean was no longer there. Bettina ran across the room. Paul remained alone, much surprised, understanding nothing of what had passed.

Jean was already at the hall-door, when he heard some one call—"Monsieur Jean! Monsieur Jean!"

He stopped and turned. She was near him.

"You are going without wishing me good-by?"

"I beg your pardon, I am very tired."

"Then you must not walk home, the weather is threatening," she extended her hand out-of-doors, "it is raining already."

"Come and have a cup of tea in the little drawing-room, and I will tell them to drive you home," and turning toward one of the footmen, "tell them to send a carriage round directly."

"No, Miss Percival, pray, the open air will revive me. I must walk, let me go."

"Go, then, but you have no greatcoat, take something to wrap yourself in."

"I shall not be cold—while you with that open dress—I shall go to oblige you to go in." And without even offering his hand, he ran quickly down the steps.

"If I touch her hand," he thought, "I am lost, my secret will escape me."

His secret! He did not know that Bettina read his heart like an open book.

When Jean had descended the steps, he hesitated one short moment, these words were upon his lips:

"I love you, I adore you, and that is why I will see you no more!"

But he did not utter these words, he fled away and was soon lost in the darkness.

Bettina remained there against the brilliant background made by the light from the hall. Great drops of rain, driven by the wind, swept across her bare shoulders and made her shiver; she took no notice, she distinctly heard her heart beat.

"I knew very well that he loved me," she thought, "but now I am very sure, that I, too—oh! yes! I, too!—"

All at once, in one of the great mirrors in the hall door, she saw the reflection of the two footmen who stood there motionless, near the oak table in the hall. Bettina heard bursts of laughter and the strains of the waltz; she stopped. She wished to be alone, completely alone, and addressing one of the servants, she said:

"Go and tell your mistress that I am very tired, and have gone to my own room."

Annie, her maid, had fallen asleep, in an easy-chair. She sent her away. She would undress herself. She let herself sink on a couch, she was oppressed with delicious emotion.

The door of her room opened, it was Mrs. Scott.

"You are not well, Bettina?"

"Oh, Susie, is it you, my Susie? how nice of you to come. Sit here, close to me, quite close to me."

She hid herself like a child in the arms of her sister, caressing with her burning brow Susie's fresh shoulders. Then she suddenly burst into sobs, great sobs, which stifled, suffocated her.

"Bettina, my darling, what is the matter?"

"Nothing, nothing! it is nothing, it is joy—joy!"

"Joy?"

"Yes, yes, wait—let me cry a little, it will do me so much good. But do not be frightened, do not be frightened."

Beneath her sister's caress, Bettina grew calm, soothed.

"It is over, I am better now, and I can talk to you. It is about Jean."

"Jean! You call him Jean?"

"Yes, I call him Jean. Have you not noticed for some time that he was dull and looked quite melancholy?"

"Yes, I have."

"When he came, he went and posted himself near you, and stayed there, silent, absorbed to such a degree, that for several days I asked myself— pardon me for speaking to you with such frankness, it is my way, you know—I asked myself if it were not you whom he loved, Susie; you are so charming, it would have been so natural! But no, it was not you, it was I!"

"You?"

"Yes, I. Listen, he scarcely dared to look at me, he avoided me, he fled from me, he was afraid of me, evidently afraid. Now, in justice, am I a person to inspire fear? I am sure I am not!"

"Certainly not!"

"Ah! it was not I of whom he was afraid, it was my money, my horrid money! This money which attracts all the others and tempts them so much, this money terrifies him, drives him desperate, because he is not like the others, because he —"

"My child, take care, perhaps you are mistaken."

"Oh, no, I am not mistaken! Just now, at the door, when he was going away, he said some words to me. These words were nothing. But if you had seen his distress in spite of all his efforts to control it! Susie, dear Susie, by the affection

which I bear you, and God knows how great is that affection, this is my conviction, my absolute conviction—if, instead of being Miss Percival, I had been a poor little girl without a penny Jean would then have taken my hand, and have told me that he loved me, and if he had spoken to me thus, do you know what I should have replied?"

"That you loved him, too?"

"Yes; and that is why I am so happy. With me it is a fixed idea that I must adore the man who will be my husband. Well! I don't say that I adore Jean, no, not yet; but still it is beginning, Susie, and it is beginning so sweetly."

"Bettina, it really makes me uneasy to see you in this state of excitement. I do not deny that Monsieur Reynaud is much attached to you—"

"Oh, more than that, more than that!"

"Loves you, if you like; yes, you are right, you are quite right. He loves you; and are you not worthy, my darling, of all the love that one can bear you? As to Jean—it is progressing decidedly, here am I also calling him Jean—well! you know what I think of him. I rank him very, very high. But in spite of that, is he really a suitable husband for you?"

"Yes, if I love him."

"I am trying to talk sensibly to you, and you, on the contrary— Understand me, Bettina; I have an experience of the world which you can not have. Since our arrival in Paris, we have been launched into a very brilliant, very animated, very aristocratic society. You might have been already, if you had liked, marchioness or princess."

"Yes, but I did not like."

"It would not matter to you to be called Madame Reynaud?"

"Not in the least, if I love him."

"Ah! you return always to—"

"Because that is the true question. There is no other. Now I will be sensible in

my turn. This question—I grant that this is not quite settled, and that I have, perhaps, allowed myself to be too easily persuaded. You see how sensible I am. Jean is going away to-morrow, I shall not see him again for three weeks. During these three weeks I shall have ample time to question myself, to examine myself, in a word, to know my own mind. Under my giddy manner, I am serious and thoughtful, you know that?"

"Oh, yes, I know it."

"Well, I will make this petition to you, as I would have addressed it to our mother had she been here. If, in three weeks, I say to you, 'Susie, I am certain that I love him,' will you allow me to go to him, myself, quite alone, and ask him if he will have me for his wife? That is what you did with Richard. Tell me, Susie, will you allow me?"

"Yes, I will allow you."

Bettina embraced her sister, and murmured these words in her ear:

"Thank you, mamma."

"Mamma, mamma! It was thus that you used to call me when you were a child, when we were alone in the world together, when I used to undress you in our poor room in New York, when I held you in my arms, when I laid you in your little bed, when I sang you to sleep. And since then, Bettina, I have had only one desire in the world, your happiness. That is why I beg you to reflect well. Do not answer me, do not let us talk any more of that. I wish to leave you very calm, very tranquil. You have sent away Annie, would you like me to be your little mamma again tonight, to undress you, and put you to bed as I used to do?"

"Yes, I should like it very much."

"And when you are in bed, you promise me to be very good?"

"As good as an angel."

"You will do your best to go to sleep?"

"My very best."

"Very quietly, without thinking of anything?"

"Very quietly, without thinking of anything."

"Very well, then."

Ten minutes after, Bettina's pretty head rested gently amid embroideries and lace. Susie said to her sister:

"I am going down to those people who bore me dreadfully this evening. Before going to my own room, I shall come back and see if you are asleep. Do not speak. Go to sleep."

She went away. Bettina remained alone; she tried to keep her word; she endeavored to go to sleep, but only half-succeeded. She fell into a half-slumber which left her floating between dream and reality. She had promised to think of nothing, and yet she thought of him, always of him, of nothing but him, vaguely, confusedly.

How long a time passed thus she could not tell.

All at once it seemed to her that some one was walking in her room; she half-opened her eyes, and thought she recognized her sister. In a very sleepy voice she said to her:

"You know I love him."

"Hush! go to sleep."

"I am asleep! I am asleep!"

At last she did fall sound asleep, less profoundly, however, than usual, for about four o'clock in the morning she was suddenly awakened by a noise, which, the night before, would not have disturbed her slumber. The rain fell in torrents, and beat against her window.

"Oh, it is raining!" she thought. "He will get wet."

That was her first thought. She rose, crossed the room barefooted, half-opened the shutters. The day had broke, gray and lowering; the clouds were heavy with

rain, the wind blew tempestuously, and drove the rain in gusts before it.

Bettina did not go back to bed, she felt it would be quite impossible to sleep again. She put on a dressing-gown, and remained at the window; she watched the falling rain. Since he positively must go, she would have liked the weather to be fine; she would have liked bright sunshine to have cheered his first day's march.

When she came to Longueval a month ago, Bettina did not know what this meant. But she knew it now. A day's march for the artillery is twenty or thirty miles, with an hour's halt for luncheon. It was the Abbe Constantin who had taught her that; when going their rounds in the morning among the poor, Bettina overwhelmed the Cure with questions on military affairs, and particularly on the artillery.

Twenty or thirty miles under this pouring rain! Poor Jean! Bettina thought of young Turner, young Norton, of Paul de Lavardens, who would sleep calmly till ten in the morning, while Jean was exposed to this deluge.

Paul de Lavardens!

This name awoke in her a painful memory, the memory of that waltz the evening before. To have danced like that, while Jean was so obviously in trouble! That waltz took the proportions of a crime in her eyes; it was a horrible thing that she had done.

And then, had she not been wanting in courage and frankness in that last interview with Jean? He neither could nor dared say anything; but she might have shown more tenderness, more expansiveness. Sad and suffering as he was, she should never have allowed him to go back on foot. She ought to have detained him at any price. Her imagination tormented and excited her; Jean must have carried away with him the impression that she was a bad little creature, heartless and pitiless. And in half-an-hour he was going away, away for three weeks. Ah! if she could by any means—but there is a way! The regiment must pass along the wall of the park, under the terrace.

Bettina was seized with a wild desire to see Jean pass; he would understand well, if he saw her at such an hour, that she had come to beg his pardon for her cruelty of the previous evening. Yes, she would go! But she had promised to Susie to be as good as an angel, and to do what she was going to do, was that being as good

as an angel? She would make up for it by acknowledging all to Susie when she came in again, and Susie would forgive her.

She would go! She had made up her mind. Only how should she dress herself? She had nothing at hand but a muslin dressing-gown, little high-heeled slippers, and blue satin shoes. She might wake her maid. Oh, never would she dare to do that, and time pressed; a quarter to five! the regiment would start at five o'clock.

She might, perhaps, manage with the muslin dressing-gown, and the satin shoes; in the hall, she might find her hat, her little sabots which she wore in the garden, and the large tartan cloak for driving in wet weather. She half-opened her door with infinite precautions. Everything slept in the house; she crept along the corridor, she descended the staircase.

If only the little sabots are there in their place; that is her great anxiety. There they are! She slips them on over her satin shoes, she wraps herself in her great mantle.

She hears that the rain has redoubled in violence. She notices one of those large umbrellas which the footmen use on the box in wet weather; she seizes it; she is ready; but when she is ready to go, she sees that the hall-door is fastened by a great iron bar. She tries to raise it; but the bolt holds fast, resists all her efforts, and the great clock in the hall slowly strikes five. He is starting at that moment.

She will see him! she will see him! Her will is excited by these obstacles. She makes a great effort; the bar yields, slips back in the groove. But Bettina has made a long scratch on her hand, from which issues a slender stream of blood. Bettina twists her handkerchief round her hand, takes her great umbrella, turns the key in the lock; and opens the door.

At last she is out of the house!

The weather is frightful. The wind and the rain rage together. It takes five or six minutes to reach the terrace which looks over the road. Bettina darts forward courageously; her head bent, hidden under her immense umbrella, she has taken a few steps. All at once, furious, mad, blinding, a sudden squall bursts upon Bettina, buries her in her mantle, drives her along, lifts her almost from the ground, turns the umbrella violently inside out; that is nothing, the disaster is not yet complete.

Bettina has lost one of her little sabots; they were not practical sabots; they were only pretty little things for fine weather, and at this moment, when Bettina struggles against the tempest with her blue satin shoe half buried in the wet gravel, at this moment the wind bears to her the distant echo of a blast of trumpets. It is the regiment starting!

Bettina makes a desperate effort, abandons her umbrella, finds her little sabot, fastens it on as well as she can, and starts off running, with a deluge descending on her head.

At last, she is in the wood, the trees protect her a little. Another blast, nearer this time. Bettina fancies she hears the rolling of the gun-carriages. She makes a last effort, there is the terrace, she is there just in time.

Twenty yards off she perceived the white horses of the trumpeters, and along the road caught glimpses, vaguely appearing through the fog, of the long line of guns and wagons.

She sheltered herself under one of the old limes which bordered the terrace. She watched, she waited. He is there among that confused mass of riders. Will she be able to recognize him? And he, will he see her? Will any chance make him turn his head that way?

Bettina knows that he is Lieutenant in the second battery of his regiment; she knows that a battery is composed of six guns, and six ammunition wagons. Of course it is the Abbe Constantin who has taught her that. Thus she must allow the first battery to pass, that is to say, count six guns, six wagons, and then—he will be there.

There he is at last, wrapped in his great cloak, and it is he who sees, who recognizes her first. A few moments before, he had recalled to his mind a long walk which he had taken with her one evening, when night was falling, on that terrace. He raised his eyes, and the very spot where he remembered having seen her, was the spot where he found her again. He bowed, and, bareheaded in the rain, turning round in his saddle, as long as he could see her, he looked at her. He said again to himself what he had said the previous evening:

"It is for the last time."

With a charming gesture of both hands, she returned his farewell, and this

gesture, repeated many times, brought her hands so near, so near her lips, that one might have fancied—

"Ah!" she thought, "if, after that, he does not understand that I love him, and does not forgive me my money!"

CHAPTER IX

THE REWARD OF TENDER COURAGE

It was the 20th of August, the day which should bring Jean back to Longueval.

Bettina awoke very early, rose, and ran immediately to the window. The evening before, the sky had looked threatening, heavy with clouds. Bettina slept but little, and all night prayed that it might not rain the next day.

In the early morning a dense fog enveloped the park of Longueval, the trees of which were hidden from view, as by a curtain. But gradually the rays of the sun dissipated the mist, the trees became vaguely discernible through the vapor; then, suddenly, the sun shone brilliantly, flooding with light the park, and the fields beyond; and the lake, where the black swans were disporting themselves in the radiant light, appeared as bright as a sheet of polished metal.

The weather was going to be beautiful. Bettina was a little superstitious. The sunshine gives her good hope and good courage. "The day begins well, so it will finish well."

Mr. Scott had come home several days before. Susie, Betting, and the children waited on the quay at Havre for the arrival of his steamer.

They exchanged many tender embraces; then, Richard, addressing his sister-in-law, said, laughingly:

"Well, when is the wedding to be?"

"What wedding?"

"Yours."

"My wedding?"

"Yes, certainly."

"And to whom am I about to be married?"

"To Monsieur Jean Reynaud."

"Ah! Susie has written to you?"

"Susie? Not at all. Susie has not said a word. It is you, Bettina, who have written to me. For the last two months, all your letters have been occupied with this young officer."

"All my letters?"

"Yes, and you have written to me oftener and more at length than usual. I do not complain of that, but I do ask when you are going to present me with a brother-in-law?"

He spoke jestingly, but Bettina replied:

"Soon, I hope."

Mr. Scott perceived that the affair was serious. When returning in the carriage, Bettina asked Mr. Scott if he had kept her letters.

"Certainly," he replied.

She read them again. It was indeed only with "Jean" that all these letters have been filled. She found therein related, down to the most trifling details, their first meeting. There was the portrait of Jean in the vicarage garden, with his straw hat and his earthenware salad-dish— and then it was again Monsieur Jean, always Monsieur Jean. She discovered that she had loved him much longer than she had suspected. At last it was the 10th of August. Luncheon was just over, and Harry and Bella were impatient. They knew that between one and two o'clock the regiment must pass through the village. They had been promised that they should be taken to see the soldiers pass, and for them, as well as for Bettina, the return of the 9th Artillery was a great event.

"Aunt Betty," said Bella, "Aunt Betty, come with us."

"Yes, do come," said Harry, "do come, we shall see our friend Jean, on his big gray horse."

Bettina resisted, refused—and yet how great was the temptation. But no, she would not go, she would not see Jean again till the evening, when she would give him that decisive explanation for which she had been preparing herself for the last three weeks. The children went away with their governesses. Bettina, Susie, and Richard went to sit in the park, quite close to the castle, and as soon as they were established there:

"Susie," said Bettina, "I am going to remind you today of your promise; you remember what passed between us the night of his departure; we settled that if, on the day of his return, I could say to you, 'Susie, I am sure that I love him,' we settled that you would allow me to speak frankly to him, and ask him if he would have me for his wife."

"Yes, I did promise you. But are you very sure?"

"Absolutely—and now the time has come to redeem your promise. I warn you that I intend to bring him to this very place," she added, smiling, "to this seat; and to use almost the same language to him that you formerly used to Richard. You were successful, Susie, you are perfectly happy, and I—that is what I wish to be."

"Richard, Susie has told you about Monsieur Reynaud."

"Yes, and she has told me that there is no man of whom she has a higher opinion, but—"

"But she has told you that for me it would be a rather quiet, rather commonplace marriage. Oh, naughty sister! Will you believe it, Richard, that I can not get this fear out of her head? She does not understand that, before everything, I wish to love and be loved; will you believe it, Richard, that only last week she laid a horrible trap for me? You know that there exists a certain Prince Romanelli."

"Yes, I know you might have been a princess."

"That would not have been immensely difficult, I believe. Well, one day I was so

foolish as to say to Susie, that, in extremity, I might accept the Prince Romanelli. Now, just imagine what she did. The Turners were at Trouville, Susie had arranged a little plot. We lunched with the Prince, but the result was disastrous. Accept him! The two hours that I passed with him, I passed in asking myself how I could have said such a thing. No, Richard; no, Susie; I will be neither princess, nor marchioness, nor countess. My wish is to be Madame Jean Reynaud; if, however, Monsieur Jean Reynaud will agree to it, and that is by no means certain."

The regiment entered the village, and suddenly military music burst martial and joyous across the space. All three remained silent, it was the regiment, it was Jean who passed; the sound became fainter, died away, and Bettina continued:

"No, that is not certain. He loves me, however, and much, but without knowing well what I am; I think that I deserve to be loved differently; I think that I should not cause him so much terror, so much fear, if he knew me better, and that is why I ask you to permit me to speak to him this evening freely, from my heart."

"We will allow you," replied Richard, "you shall speak to him freely, for we know, both of us, Bettina, that you will never do anything that is not noble and generous."

"At least, I shall try."

The children ran up to them; they had seen Jean, he was quite white with dust, he said good-morning to them.

"Only," added Bella, "he is not very nice, he did not stop to talk to us; usually he stops, but this time he wouldn't."

"Yes, he would," replied Harry, "for at first he seemed as if he were going to—and then he would not, he went away."

"Well, he didn't stop, and it is so nice to talk to a soldier, especially when he is on horseback."

"It is not that only, it is that we are very fond of Monsieur Jean; if you knew, papa, how kind he is, and how nicely he plays with us."

"And what beautiful drawings he makes. Harry, you remember that great

Punch who was so funny, with his stick, you know?"

"And the dog, there was the little dog, too, as in the show."

The two children went away talking of their friend Jean.

"Decidedly," said Mr. Scott, "every one likes him in this house."

"And you will be like every one else when you know him," replied Bettina.

The regiment broke into a trot along the highroad, after leaving the village. There was the terrace where Bettina had been the other morning. Jean said to himself:

"Supposing she should be there."

He dreaded and hoped it at the same time. He raised his head, he looked, she was not there.

He had not seen her again, he would not see her again, for a long-time at least. He would start that very evening at six o'clock for Paris; one of the personages in the War Office was interested in him; he would try to get exchanged into another regiment.

Alone at Cercottes, Jean had had time to reflect deeply, and that was the result of his reflections. He could not, he must not, be Bettina Percival's husband.

The men dismounted at the barracks, Jean took leave of his Colonel, his comrades; all was over. He was free, he could go.

But he did not go; he looked around him. How happy he was three months ago, when he rode out of that great yard amid the noise of the cannon rolling over the pavement of Souvigny; but how sadly he should ride away to-day! Formerly his life was there; where would it be hereafter?

He returned, went to his own room, and wrote to Mrs. Scott; he told her that his duties obliged him to leave immediately, he could not dine at the castle, and begged Mrs. Scott to remember him to Miss Bettina. Bettina, ah! what trouble it cost him to write that name. He closed his letter; he would send it directly.

He made his preparations for departure; then he went to wish his godfather farewell. That is what cost him most; he must speak to him only of a short absence.

He opened one of the drawers of his bureau to take out some money. The first thing that met his eyes was a little note on bluish paper; it was the only note which he had ever received from her.

"Will you have the kindness to give to the servant the book of which you spoke yesterday evening. Perhaps it will be a little serious for me, but yet I should like to try to read it. We shall see you to-night; come as early as possible." It was signed "Bettina."

Jean read and re-read these few lines, but soon he could read them no longer, his eyes were dim.

"It is all that is left me of her," he thought.

At the same moment the Abbe Constantin was tete-a-tete with old Pauline, they were making up their accounts. The financial situation was admirable; more than 2,000 francs in hand! And the wishes of Susie and Bettina were accomplished, there were no more poor in the neighborhood. His old servant, Pauline, had even occasional scruples of conscience.

"You see, Monsieur le Cure," said she, "perhaps we give them a little too much. Then it will be spread about in other parishes that here they can always find charity. And do you know what will happen then, one of these days? Poor people will come and settle in Longueval."

The Cure gave fifty francs to Pauline. She went to take them to a poor man who had broken his arm a few days before, by falling from the top of a hay-cart.

The Abbe Constantin remained alone in the vicarage. He was rather anxious. He had watched for the passing of the regiment; but Jean only stopped for a moment, he looked sad. For some time, the Abbe had noticed that Jean had no longer the flow of good-humor and gayety he once possessed.

The Cure did not disturb himself too much about it, believing it to be one of those little youthful troubles which did not concern a poor old priest. But, on this occasion, Jean's disturbance was very perceptible.

"I will come back directly," he said to the Cure, "I want to speak to you."

He turned abruptly away. The Abbe Constantin had not even had time to give Loulou his piece of sugar, or rather his pieces of sugar, for he had put five or six in his pocket, considering that Loulou had well deserved this feast by ten long days' march, and a score of nights passed under the open sky.

Besides, since Mrs. Scott had lived at Longueval, Loulou had very often had several pieces of sugar; the Abbe Constantin had become extravagant, prodigal; he felt himself a millionaire, the sugar for Loulou was one of his follies. One day, even, he had been on the point of addressing to Loulou his everlasting little speech:

"This comes from the new mistresses of Longueval; pray for them to- night."

It was three o'clock when Jean arrived at the vicarage, and the Cure said, immediately:

"You told me that you wanted to speak to me; what is it about?"

"About something, my dear godfather, which will surprise you, will grieve you —"

"Grieve me!"

"Yes, and which grieves me, too—I have come to bid you farewell."

"Farewell! you are going away?"

"Yes, I am going away."

"When?"

"To-day, in two hours."

"In two hours? But, my dear boy, you were going to dine at the castle to-night."

"I have just written to Mrs. Scott to excuse me. I am positively obliged to go."

"Directly?"

"Directly."

"And where are you going?"

"To Paris."

"To Paris! Why this sudden determination?"

"Not so very sudden! I have thought about it for a long time."

"And you have said nothing about it to me! Jean, something has happened. You are a man, and I have no longer the right to treat you as a child; but you know how much I love you; if you have vexations, troubles, why not tell them to me? I could perhaps advise you. Jean, why go to Paris?"

"I did not wish to tell you, it will give you pain; but you have the right to know. I am going to Paris to ask to be exchanged into another regiment."

"Into another regiment! To leave Souvigny!"

"Yes, that is just it; I must leave Souvigny for a short time, for a little while only; but to leave Souvigny is necessary, it is what I wish above all things."

"And what about me, Jean, do you not think of me? A little while! A little while! But that is all that remains to me of life, a little while. And during these last days, that I owe to the grace of God, it was my happiness, yes, Jean, my happiness, to feel you here, near me, and now you are going away! Jean, wait a little patiently, it can not be for very long now for. Wait until the good God has called me to himself, wait till I shall be gone, to meet there, at his side, your father and your mother. Do not go, Jean, do not go."

"If you love me, I love you, too, and you know it well."

"Yes, I know it."

"I have just the same affection for you now that I had when I was quite little, when you took me to yourself, when you brought me up. My heart has not changed, will never change. But if duty—if honor—oblige me to go?"

"Ah, if it is duty, if it is honor, I say nothing more, Jean, that stands before all!—

all!—all! I have always known you a good judge of your duty, your honor. Go, my boy, go, I ask you nothing more, I wish to know no more."

"But I wish to tell you all," cried Jean, vanquished by his emotion, "and it is better that you should know all. You will stay here, you will return to the castle, you will see her again—her!"

"See her! Who?"

"Bettina!"

"Bettina?"

"I adore her, I adore her!"

"Oh, my poor boy!"

"Pardon me for speaking to you of these things; but I tell you as I would have told my father."

"And then, I have not been able to speak of it to any one, and it stifled me; yes, it is a madness which has seized me, which has grown upon me, little by little, against my will, for you know very-well—My God! It was here that I began to love her. You know, when she came here with her sister—with the little 'rouleaux' of francs—her hair fell down—and then the evening, the month of Mary! Then I was permitted to see her freely, familiarly, and you, yourself, spoke to me constantly of her. You praised her sweetness, her goodness. How often have you told me that there was no one in the world better than she is!"

"And I thought it, and I think it still. And no one here knows her better than I do, for it is I alone who have seen her with the poor. If you only knew how tender, and how good she is! Neither wretchedness nor suffering repulse her. But, my dear boy, I am wrong to tell you all this."

"No, no, I will see her no more, I promise you; but I like to hear you speak of her."

"In your whole life, Jean, you will never meet a better woman, nor one who has more elevated sentiments. To such a point, that one day—she had taken me with her in an open carriage, full of toys—she was taking these toys to a poor sick

little girl, and when she gave them to her, to make the poor little thing laugh, to amuse her, she talked so prettily to her that I thought of you, and I said to myself, I remember it now, 'Ah, if she were poor!'"

"Ah! if she were poor, but she is not."

"Oh, no! But what can you do, my poor child! If it gives you pain to see her, to live near her; above all, if it will prevent you suffering— go, go—and yet, and yet—"

The old priest became thoughtful, let his head fall between his hands, and remained silent for some moments; then he continued:

"And yet, Jean, do you know what I think? I have seen a great deal of Mademoiselle Bettina since she came to Longueval. Well—when I reflect— it did not astonish me that any one should be interested in you, for it seemed so natural—but she talked always, yes, always of you."

"Of me?"

"Yes, of you, and of your father and mother; she was curious to know how you lived. She begged me to explain to her what a soldier's life was, the life of a true soldier, who loved his profession, and performed his duties conscientiously."

"It is extraordinary, since you have told me this, recollections crowd upon me, a thousand little things collect and group themselves together. They returned from Havre yesterday at three o'clock. Well! an hour after their arrival she was here. And it was of you of whom she spoke directly. She asked if you had written to me, if you had not been ill, when you would arrive, at what hour, if the regiment would pass through the village?"

"It is useless at this moment, my dear godfather," said Jean, "to recall all these memories."

"No, it is not useless. She seemed so pleased, so happy even, that she should see you again! She would make quite a fete of the dinner this evening. She would introduce you to her brother-in-law, who has come back. There is no one else in the house at this moment, not a single visitor. She insisted strongly on this point, and I remember her last words—she was there, on the threshold of the door:

"'There will be only five of us,' she said, 'you and Monsieur Jean, my sister, my brother-in-law, and myself.'

"And then she added, laughing, 'Quite a family party.'

"With these words she went, she almost ran away. Quite a family party! Do you know what I think, Jean? Do you know?"

"You must not think that, you must not."

"Jean, I believe that she loves you."

"And I believe it, too."

"You, too!"

"When I left her, three weeks ago, she was so agitated, so moved! She saw me sad and unhappy, she would not let me go. It was at the door of the castle. I was obliged to tear myself, yes, literally tear myself away. I should have spoken, burst out, told her all. After I had gone a few steps, I stopped and turned. She could no longer see me, I was lost in the darkness; but I could see her. She stood there motionless, her shoulders and arms bare, in the rain, her eyes fixed on the way by which I had gone. Perhaps I am mad to think that. Perhaps it was only a feeling of pity. But no, it was something more than pity, for do you know what she did the next morning? She came at five o'clock, in the most frightful weather, to see me pass with the regiment—and then—the way she bade me adieu—oh, my friend, my dear old friend!"

"But then," said the poor Cure, completely bewildered, completely at a loss, "but then, I do not understand you at all. If you love her, Jean, and if she loves you?"

"But that is, above all, the reason why I must go. If it were only I, if I were certain that she has not perceived my love, certain that she has not been touched by it, I would stay, I would stay—for nothing but for the sweet joy of seeing her, and I would love her from afar, without any hope, for nothing but the happiness of loving her. But no, she has understood too well, and far from discouraging me—that is what forces me to go."

"No, I do not understand it! I know well, my poor boy, we are speaking of things in which I am no great scholar, but you are both good, young, and charming; you

love her, she would love you, and you will not!"

"And her money! her money!"

"What matters her money? If it is only that, is it because of her money that you have loved her? It is rather in spite of her money. Your conscience, my son, would be quite at peace with regard to that, and that would suffice."

"No, that would not suffice. To have a good opinion of one's self is not enough; that opinion must be shared by others."

"Oh, Jean! Among all who know you, who can doubt you?"

"Who knows? And then there is another thing besides this question of money, another thing more serious and more grave. I am not the husband suited to her."

"And who could be more worthy than you?"

"The question to be considered is not my worth; we have to consider what she is and what I am, to ask what ought to be her life, and what ought to be my life."

"One day, Paul—you know he has rather a blunt way of saying things, but that very bluntness often places thoughts much more distinctly before us —Paul was speaking of her; he did not suspect anything; if he had, he is good-natured, he would not have spoken thus—well, he said to me:

"'What she needs is a husband who would be entirely devoted to her, to her alone, a husband who would have no other care than to make her existence a perpetual holiday, a husband who would give himself, his whole life, in return for her money.'

"You know me; such a husband I can not, I must not be. I am a soldier, and shall remain one. If the chances of my career sent me some day to a garrison in the depths of the Alps, or in some almost unknown village in Algeria, could I ask her to follow me? Could I condemn her to the life of a soldier's wife, which is in some degree the life of a soldier himself? Think of the life which she leads now, of all that luxury, of all those pleasures!"

"Yes," said the Abbe, "that is more serious than the question of money."

"So serious that there is no hesitation possible. During the three weeks that I passed alone in the camp, I have well considered all that; I have thought of nothing else, and loving her as I do love, the reason must indeed be strong which shows me clearly my duty. I must go, I must go far, very far away, as far as possible. I shall suffer much, but I must not see her again! I must not see her again!"

Jean sank on a chair near the fireplace. He remained there quite overpowered with his emotion. The old priest looked at him.

"To see you suffer, my poor boy! That such suffering should fall upon you! It is too cruel, too unjust!"

At that moment some one knocked gently at the door.

"Ah!" said the Cure, "do not be afraid, Jean. I will send them away."

The Abbe went to the door, opened it, and recoiled as if before an unexpected apparition.

It was Bettina. In a moment she had seen Jean, and going direct to him:

"You!" cried she. "Oh, how glad I am!"

He rose. She took his hands, and addressing the Cure, she said:

"I beg your pardon, Monsieur le Cure, for going to him first. You, I saw yesterday, and him, not for three whole weeks, not since a certain night, when he left our house, sad and suffering."

She still held Jean's hands. He had neither power to make a movement nor to utter a sound.

"And now," continued Betting, "are you better? No, not yet, I can see, still sad. Ah, I have done well to come! It was an inspiration! However, it embarrasses me a little, it embarrasses me a great deal, to find you here. You will understand why when you know what I have come to ask of your godfather."

She relinquished his hands, and turning toward the Abbe, said:

"I have come to beg you to listen to my confession—yes, my confession. But do not go away, Monsieur Jean; I will make my confession publicly. I am quite willing to speak before you, and now I think of it, it will be better thus. Let us sit down, shall we?"

She felt herself full of confidence and daring. She burned with fever, but with that fever which, on the field of battle, gives to a soldier ardor, heroism, and disdain of danger. The emotion which made Bettina's heart beat quicker than usual was a high and generous emotion. She said to herself:

"I will be loved! I will love! I will be happy! I will make him happy! And since he has not sufficient courage to do it, I must have it for both. I must march alone, my head high, and my heart at ease, to the conquest of our love, to the conquest of our happiness!"

From her first words Bettina had gained over the Abbe and Jean a complete ascendancy. They let her say what she liked, they let her do as she liked, they felt that the hour was supreme; they understood that what was happening would be decisive, irrevocable, but neither was in a position to foresee.

They sat down obediently, almost automatically; they waited, they listened. Alone, of the three, Bettina retained her composure. It was in a calm and even voice that she began.

"I must tell you first, Monsieur le Cure, to set your conscience quite at rest, I must tell you that I am here with the consent of my sister and my brother-in-law. They know why I have come; they know what I am about to do. They not only know, but they approve. That is settled, is it not? Well, what brings me here is your letter, Monsieur Jean, that letter in which you tell my sister that you can not dine with us this evening, and that you are positively obliged to leave here. This letter has unsettled all my plans. I had intended, this evening—of course with the permission of my sister and brother-in-law—I had intended, after dinner, to take you into the park, to seat myself with you on a bench; I was childish enough to choose the place beforehand."

"There I should have delivered a little speech, well prepared, well studied, almost learned by heart, for since your departure I have scarcely thought of anything else; I repeat it to myself from morning to night. That is what I had proposed to do, and you understand that your letter caused me much

embarrassment. I reflected a little, and thought that if I addressed my little speech to your godfather it would be almost the same as if I addressed it to you. So I have come, Monsieur le Cure, to beg you to listen to me."

"I will listen to you, Miss Percival," stammered the Abbe.

"I am rich, Monsieur le Cure, I am very rich, and to speak frankly I love my wealth very much—yes, very much. To it I owe the luxury which surrounds me, luxury which, I acknowledge—it is a confession—is by no means disagreeable to me. My excuse is that I am still very young; it will perhaps pass as I grow older, but of that I am not very sure. I have another excuse; it is, that if I love money a little for the pleasure that it procures me, I love it still more for the good which it allows me to do. I love it—selfishly, if you like—for the joy of giving, but I think that my fortune is not very badly placed in my hands. Well, Monsieur le Cure, in the same way that you have the care of souls, it seems that I have the care of money. I have always thought, 'I wish, above all things, that my husband should be worthy of sharing this great fortune. I wish to be very sure that he will make a good use of it with me while I am here, and after me, if I must leave this world first.' I thought of another thing; I thought, 'He who will be my husband must be some one I can love!' And now, Monsieur le Cure, this is where my confession really begins. There is a man, who for the last two months, has done all he can to conceal from me that he loves me; but I do not doubt that this man loves me. You do love me, Jean?"

"Yes," said Jean, in a low voice, his eyes cast down, looking like a criminal, "I do love you!"

"I knew it very well, but I wanted to hear you say it, and now I entreat you, do not utter a single word. Any words of yours would be useless, would disturb me, would prevent me from going straight to my aim, and telling you what I positively intend to say. Promise me to stay there, sitting still, without moving, without speaking. You promise me?"

"I promise you."

Bettina, as she went on speaking, began to lose a little of her confidence, her voice trembled slightly. She continued, however, with a gayety that was a little forced:

"Monsieur le Cure, I do not blame you for what has happened, yet all this is a

little your fault."

"My fault!"

"Ah! do not speak, not even you. Yes, I repeat it, your fault. I am certain that you have spoken well of me to Jean, much too well. Perhaps, without that, he would not have thought— And at the same time you have spoken very well of him to me. Not too well—no, no—but yet very well! Then, I had so much confidence in you, that I began to look at him, and examine, him with a little more attention. I began to compare him with those who, during the last year, had asked my hand. It seemed to me that he was in every respect superior to them.

"At last, it happened, on a certain day, or rather on a certain evening- three weeks ago, the evening before you left here, Jean—I discovered that I loved you. Yes, Jean, I love you! I entreat you, do not speak; stay where you are; do not come near me.

"Before I came here, I thought I had supplied myself with a good stock of courage, but you see I have no longer my fine composure of a minute ago. But I have still something to tell you, and the most important of all. Jean, listen to me well; I do not wish for a reply torn from your emotion; I know that you love me. If you marry me, I do not wish it to be only for love; I wish it to be also for reason. During the fortnight before you left here, you took so much pains to avoid me, to escape any conversation, that I have not been able to show myself to you as I am. Perhaps there are in me certain qualities which you do not suspect.

"Jean, I know what you are, I know to what I should bind myself in marrying you, and I should be for you not only the loving and tender woman, but the courageous and constant wife. I know your entire life; your godfather has related it to me. I know why you became a soldier; I know what duties, what sacrifices, the future may demand from you. Jean, do not suppose that I shall turn you from any of these duties, from any of these sacrifices. If I could be disappointed with you for anything, it would be, perhaps, for this thought—oh, you must have had it!—that I should wish you free, and quite my own, that I should ask you to abandon your career. Never! never! Understand well, I shall never ask such a thing of you.

"A young girl whom I know did that when she married, and she did wrong. I

love you, and I wish you to be just what you are. It is because you live differently from, and better than, those who have before desired me for a wife, that I desire you for a husband. I should love you less— perhaps I should not love you at all, though that would be very difficult—if you were to begin to live as all those live whom I would not have. When I can follow you, I will follow you; wherever you are will be my duty, wherever you are will be my happiness. And if the day comes when you can not take me, the day when you must go alone, well! Jean, on that day, I promise you to be brave, and not take your courage from you.

"And now, Monsieur le Cure, it is not to him, it is to you that I am speaking; I want you to answer me, not him. Tell me, if he loves me, and feels me worthy of his love, would it be just to make me expiate so severely the fortune that I possess? Tell me, should he not agree to be my husband?"

"Jean," said the old priest, gravely, "marry her. It is your duty, and it will be your happiness!"

Jean approached Bettina, took her in his arms, and pressed upon her brow the first kiss.

Bettina gently freed herself, and addressing the Abbe, said:

"And now, Monsieur l'Abbe, I have still one thing to ask you. I wish—
I wish—"

"You wish?"

"Pray, Monsieur le Cure, embrace me, too."

The old priest kissed her paternally on both cheeks, and then Bettina continued:

"You have often told me, Monsieur le Cure, that Jean was almost like your own son, and I shall be almost like your own daughter, shall I not? So you will have two children, that is all."

.....

A month after, on the 12th of September, at mid-day, Bettina, in the simplest of wedding-gowns, entered the church of Longueval, while, placed behind the altar,

the trumpets of the 9th Artillery rang joyously through the arches of the old church.

Nancy Turner had begged for the honor of playing the organ on this solemn occasion, for the poor little harmonium had disappeared; an organ, with resplendent pipes, rose in the gallery of the church—it was Miss Percival's wedding present to the Abbe Constantin.

The old Cure said mass, Jean and Bettina knelt before him, he pronounced the benediction, and then remained for some moments in prayer, his arms extended, calling down, with his whole soul, the blessings of Heaven on his two children.

Then floated from the organ the same reverie of Chopin's which Bettina had played the first time that she had entered that little village church, where was to be consecrated the happiness of her life.

And this time it was Bettina who wept.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Love and tranquillity seldom dwell at peace in the same heart
One may think of marrying, but one ought not to try to marry

End of this Project Gutenberg Etext of The Abbe Constantin, v3 by Ludovic
Halevy