ЭЖЕН СЮ

THE SEVEN CARDINAL SINS: ENVY AND INDOLENCE

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Сю Э. Ж.

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Содержание

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ENVY

CHAPTER I

IN the year 1828 any tourist who was on his way from Blois to the little town of Pont Brillant to visit – as travellers seldom fail to do – the famous castle of that name, the magnificent feudal abode of the Marquises Pont Brillant, would have been obliged to pass a farmhouse standing near the edge of the road, about two miles from the château.

If this lonely dwelling attracted the attention of the traveller, he would have been almost certain to have regarded it with mingled melancholy and disgust as one of the too numerous specimens of hideous rural architecture in France, even when these habitations belong to persons possessed of a competence. This establishment consisted of a large barn and storehouse, with two long wings in the rear. The interior of the sort of parallelogram thus formed served as a courtyard, and was filled with piles of manure rotting in pools of stagnant water, for cow, horse, and sheep stables all opened into this enclosure, where all sorts of domestic animals, from poultry to hogs, were scratching and rooting.

One of the wings in the rear served as the abode of the family. It was a story and a half high, and had no outlook save this loathsome courtyard, with the dirty, worm-eaten doors of the cow-stable for a horizon. On the other side of the structure, where no window pierced the wall, stood a superb grove of century-old oaks, a couple of acres in extent, through which flowed a beautiful stream that served as an outlet for several distant lakes. But this grove, in spite of its beauty, had become well-nigh a desert on account of the large amount of gravel that had been deposited there, and the thick growth of rushes and thistles that covered it; besides, the stream, for want of cleaning out and of a sufficient fall, was becoming turbid and stagnant.

But if this same tourist had passed this same farmhouse one year afterward, he would have been struck by the sudden metamorphosis that the place had undergone, though it still belonged to the same owner. A beautiful lawn, close and fine as velvet, and ornamented with big clumps of rose-bushes, had taken the place of the dirty manure-strewn courtyard. New doors had been cut on the other side of the horse and cow stables; the old doors had been walled up, and the house itself, as well as the big barn at the foot of the courtyard, had been whitewashed and covered with a green trellis up which vigorous shoots of honeysuckle, clematis, and woodbine were already climbing.

The wing in which the family lived had been surrounded with flowering plants and shrubbery. A gravel path led up to the main doorway, which was now shaded by a broad, rustic porch with a thatched roof in which big clumps of houseleek and dwarf iris were growing. This rustic porch, overhung with luxuriant vines, evidently served as the family sitting-room. The window-frames, which were painted a dark green, contrasted strikingly with the dazzling whiteness of the curtains and the clearness of the window-panes, and on each sill was a small jardinière made of silver birch bark, and filled with freshly gathered flowers. A light fence, half concealed by roses, lilacs, and acacias, had been run from one wing of the establishment to the other, parallel with the barn, thus enclosing this charming garden. The grove had undergone a no less complete transformation. A rich carpet of velvety turf, cut with winding walks of shining yellow sand, had superseded the rushes and thistles; the formerly sluggish stream, turned into a new bed and checked in the middle of its course by a pile of large, moss-covered rocks three or four feet high, plunged from the height in a little bubbling, dancing waterfall, then continued its clear and rapid course on a level with its grassy borders.

A few beds of scarlet geraniums, whose brilliant hues contrasted vividly with the rich, green turf, brightened this charming spot, in which the few bright sunbeams that forced their way through dense foliage made a bewitching play of light and shade, especially in the vista through which one could see in the distance the forest of Pont Brillant, dominated by its ancient castle.

The details of this complete transformation, effected in so short a time by such simple and inexpensive means, seem puerile, perhaps, but are really highly significant as the expression of one of the thousand different phases of maternal love. Yes, a young woman sixteen years of age, married when only a little over fifteen, exiled here in this solitude, had thus metamorphosed it.

It was the desire to surround her expected child with bright and beautiful objects here in this lonely spot where he was to live, that had thus developed the young mother's taste, and each pleasing innovation which she had effected in this gloomy, unattractive place, had been planned merely with the purpose of providing a suitable setting for this dear little eagerly expected child.

On the greensward in the carefully enclosed courtyard the child could play as an infant. The porch would afford a healthful shelter in case it rained or the sun was too hot. Later, when he outgrew his babyhood, he could play and run about in the shady grove, under his mother's watchful eye, and amuse himself by listening to the soft murmur of the waterfall, or by watching it dance and sparkle along over the mossy rocks. The limpid stream, kept at a uniform depth of barely two feet now, held no dangers for the child, who, on the contrary, as soon as the warm summer days came, could bathe, whenever the desire seized him, in the crystal-clear water that filtered through a bed of fine gravel.

In this, as in many other details, as we shall see by and by, a sort of inspiration seemed to have guided this young mother in her plan of changing this untidy, ugly farmhouse into a cheerful and attractive home.

At the date at which this story begins, – the last of the month of June, 1845, – the young mother had been residing in this farmhouse for seventeen years. The shrubs in the courtyard had become trees; the buildings were almost completely hidden under a luxuriant mantle of flowering vines, while even in winter the walls and porch were thickly covered with ivy; while in the adjoining grove the melancholy murmur of the little cascade and the stream were still heard. The glass door of a large room which served at the same time as a parlour for the mother and a schoolroom for her son, now sixteen years of age, opened out upon this grove. This room likewise served as a sort of museum – one might be disposed to smile at this rather pretentious word, so we will say instead a maternal shrine or reliquary, for a large but inexpensive cabinet contained a host of articles which the fond mother had carefully preserved as precious mementoes of different epochs in her son's life.

Everything bore a date, from the infant's rattle to the crown of oak leaves which the youth had won at a competitive examination in the neighbouring town of Pont Brillant, where the proud mother had sent her son to test his powers. There, too, everything had its significance, from the little broken toy gun to the emblem of white satin fringed with gold, which neophytes wear so proudly at their first communion.

These relics were puerile, even ridiculous perhaps, and yet, when we remember that all the incidents of her son's life with which these articles were associated had been important, touching, or deeply solemn events to this young mother living in complete solitude and idolising her son, we can forgive this worship of the past and also understand the feeling that had prompted her to place among these relics a small porcelain lamp, by the subdued light of which the mother had watched over her son during a long and dangerous illness from which his life had been saved by a modest but clever physician of Pont Brillant.

It is almost needless to say, too, that the walls of the room were ornamented with frames containing here a page of infantile, almost unformed handwriting, there a couple of verses which the youth had composed for his mother's birthday the year before. Besides there were the inevitable heads of Andromache and of Niobe, upon which the inexperienced crayon of the beginner usually bestows such drawn mouths and squinting eyes, apparently gazing in a sort of sullen surprise at a

pretty water-colour representing a scene on the banks of the Loire; while the lad's first books were no less carefully preserved by the mother in a bookcase containing some admirably chosen works on history, geography, travel, and literature. A piano, a music-rack, and a drawing-table completed the modest furnishings of the room.

Late in the month of June, Marie Bastien – for that was the name of this young mother – found herself in this room with her son. It was nearly five o'clock in the afternoon, and the golden rays of the declining sun, though obstructed to some extent by the slats of the Venetian blinds, were, nevertheless, playing a lively game of hide-and-seek, now with the dark woodwork, now with the big bouquets of fresh flowers in the china vases on the mantel.

A dozen or more superb half-open roses in a tall glass vase diffused a delightful perfume through the room, and brightened the table covered with books and papers, on either side of which the mother and son were busily writing.

Madame Bastien, though she was thirty-one years of age, did not look a day over twenty, so radiant was her enchanting face with youthful, we might almost say, virginal freshness, for the angelic beauty of this young woman seemed worthy to inspire the words so often addressed to the Virgin, "Hail, Mary, full of grace."

Madame Bastien wore a simple dress of pale blue and white striped percaline; a broad pink ribbon encircled her slender, supple waist, which a man could have easily spanned with his two hands. Her pretty arms were bare, or rather only slightly veiled with long lace mitts which reached above her dimpled elbows. Her luxuriant chestnut hair, with frequent glints of gold entangled in its meshes, waved naturally all over her shapely head. It was worn low over her ears, thus framing the perfect oval of her face, the transparent whiteness of which was charmingly set off by the delicate rose tint of her cheeks. Her large eyes, of the deepest and tenderest blue, were fringed with long lashes, a deep brown like her beautifully arched eyebrows, while the rich coral of her lips, the brilliant whiteness of her teeth, and the firmness of her perfect arms were convincing proofs of a naturally pure, rich blood, preserved so by the regular habits of a quiet, chaste life, a life concentrated in a single passion, maternal love.

Marie Bastien's physiognomy was singularly contradictory in expression, for if the shape of the forehead and the contour of the eyebrows indicated remarkable energy as well as uncommon strength of will combined with an unusual amount of intelligence, the expression of the eyes was one of ineffable kindness, and her smile full of sweetness and gaiety, – gaiety, as two entrancing little dimples, created by the frequency of her frank smile a little way from the velvety corners of her lips, indicated beyond a doubt. In fact this young mother fully equalled her son in joyous animation, and when the time for recreation came, the younger of the two was not always the most boisterous and gay and childish by any means, and certainly, seeing the two seated together writing, one would have taken them for brother and sister instead of mother and son.

Frederick Bastien strongly resembled his mother, though his beauty was of a more pronounced and virile type. His skin was darker, and his hair a deeper brown than his mother's, and his jet black eyebrows imparted a wonderful charm to his large blue eyes, for Frederick had his mother's eyes and expression, as well as her straight nose, kindly smile, white teeth, and scarlet lips, upon which the down of puberty was already visible.

Reared in the wholesome freedom and simplicity of rural life, Frederick, whose stature considerably exceeded that of his mother, was a model of health, youth, and grace, while one seldom saw a more intelligent, resolute, affectionate, and cheery face.

It was easy to see that maternal pride had presided over the youth's toilet; though his attire was of the simplest, most inexpensive kind, yet the pretty cerise satin cravat was remarkably becoming to a person of his complexion, his shirt front was dazzling in its whiteness, there were large pearl buttons on his nankeen vest, and his hands, far from resembling the frightful paws of the average schoolboy, with dirty nails often bitten down to the quick, and grimy, ink-stained knuckles, were

as well cared for as those of his young mother, and like hers were adorned with pink, beautifully kept nails of faultless colour. (Mothers of sixteen-year-old sons will understand and appreciate these apparently insignificant details.)

As we have already remarked, Frederick and his mother, seated opposite each other at the same table, were working, or rather digging away hard, as school-boys say, each having a volume of "The Vicar of Wakefield" to the left of them, and in front of them a sheet of foolscap which was already nearly filled.

"Pass me the dictionary, Frederick," said Madame Bastien, without raising her eyes, but extending her pretty hand to her son.

"Oh, the dictionary," responded Frederick, in a tone of mocking compassion, "the idea of being obliged to depend upon a dictionary!"

But he gave the book to his mother, not without kissing the pretty hand extended for it, however.

Marie, still without taking her eyes from her book, smiled without replying, then, placing her ivory penholder between her little teeth, which made the penholder look almost yellow in comparison, began to turn the leaves of the dictionary.

Profiting by this moment of inattention, Frederick rose from his chair, and placing his two hands upon the table, leaned over to see now far his mother had proceeded with her translation.

"Ah, ah, Frederick, you are trying to copy," said Marie, gaily, dropping the dictionary and placing her hands on the paper as if to protect it from her son's eyes. "I have caught you this time."

"No, nothing of the kind," replied Frederick, dropping into his chair again. "I only wanted to see if you were as far along as I am."

"All I know is that I have finished," responded Madame Bastien, with a triumphant air.

"What, already?" exclaimed Frederick, humbly.

As he spoke, the tall clock in the corner, after an ominous creaking and groaning, began to strike five.

"Good, it is time for recess!" exclaimed Marie, joyfully. "Do you hear, Frederick?"

And springing up, the young woman ran to her son.

"Give me ten minutes, and I will be done," pleaded Frederick, writing for dear life; "just ten minutes!"

But with charming petulance the young mother placed a paper-weight on the unfinished translation, slammed her son's books together, took his pen out of his hand, and half led, half dragged him out into the grove.

It must be admitted that Frederick offered no very determined resistance to his mother's despotic will, however.

CHAPTER II

FIVE minutes afterward an exciting game of shuttlecock was going on between Frederick and his mother.

It was a charming picture upon which the few rays of sunshine that succeeded in making their way through the dense canopy of green shone, for every movement and attitude of the participants was instinct with agility and grace.

Marie, her eyes gleaming with mischief, her red lips wreathed with a charming smile, the rose tint in her cheeks deepening, one shapely foot extended, but with her supple form thrown well back from her slim waist upward, met the shuttlecock with her racket, then sent it flying off in an entirely different direction from what Frederick had anticipated; but not in the least discomfited, the youth, throwing back the curling locks of brown hair from his brow by a sudden toss of the head, with a quick, lithe bound skilfully intercepted the winged messenger as it was about to touch the earth, and sent it flying back to his mother, who intercepted it in her turn, and with a no less adroit blow despatched it swiftly through space again. When, after describing its parabola, it made straight for Frederick's nose, whereupon the youth, in a violent effort to interpose his racket between the rapidly descending shuttlecock and his upturned face, lost his balance and fell headlong on the thick turf, after which the laughter and oft repeated bursts of hilarity on the part of the two players necessarily put an end to the game.

After their mirth had partially subsided, the mother and son, with crimson cheeks, and eyes still swimming with the tears their merriment had evoked, walked to a rustic bench in front of the waterfall to rest.

"Goodness, how absurd it is to laugh in this fashion!" exclaimed Frederick.

"You must admit that it does one good, though. It may be absurd to laugh so, as you say, but it consoles one to feel that only happy people like ourselves can ever give way to such mad fits of merriment."

"Yes, mother, you are right," said Frederick, resting his head on his mother's shoulder, "we are happy. As I sit here in the shade, this beautiful summer evening, with my head on your shoulder, gazing with half-closed eyes through the golden sunlight at our pretty home, while the soft murmur of the cascade fills the air, it seems to me it would be delightful to remain here just as we are for a hundred years."

And Frederick settled his head still more comfortably on his mother's shoulder, as if he would indeed like to spend an eternity there. The young mother, taking care not to disturb Frederick, bent her head a little to one side in order to lay her cheek upon his, and taking one of his hands in hers, replied:

"It is true that this corner of the earth has always been a sort of paradise for us, and but for the recollection of the month that you were so ill, I think we should find it difficult to recollect a single unhappy moment. Is that not so, Frederick?"

"You have always spoiled me so."

"M. Frederick doesn't know what he is talking about, evidently," responded Madame Bastien, with an affectation of grave displeasure. "There is nothing more disagreeable, and above all more unhappy, than a spoiled child. I should like to know what idle fancies and caprices I have ever encouraged in you, monsieur. Mention one if you can."

"I should think I could. In the first place you never give me the time to be bored, but take quite as much interest in my diversions and pleasures as I do. I really don't know how you manage it, but time passes so quickly in your company that I cannot believe that this is the last of June, and when the first of January comes, I know I shall say the same thing."

"Oh, you needn't try to get out of answering my question by flattering me, monsieur. Just tell me when I ever spoiled you unduly, and if I am not, on the contrary, very severe and exacting, especially in relation to your hours of study?"

"Ah, you do well to boast of being exacting in that particular. Don't you share my studies as well as my play, so study has always been as amusing as recreation to me? Consequently, I maintain that if I am happy, it is due to you. If I know anything, if I am of account, in short, it is all due to you and solely to you. Have I ever left you? Everything that is good in me, I owe to you; all that is bad, my obstinacy, for example – "

"Yes, it is true that this dear little head has a will of its own," said Madame Bastien, interrupting him and kissing him on the forehead. "I don't know any one who has a stronger will than yours, but so long as you will to be the tenderest and best of sons, as you have up to the present time, why, I am not disposed to complain. Each day brings some fresh proof of the kindness and generosity of your heart, and if I needed any auxiliary to convince you, I should invoke the testimony of the friend I see coming over there," she added, pointing out some one to Frederick. "He knows you almost as well as I do, and you must admit that his sincerity is beyond all question."

The newcomer to whom Madame Bastien had alluded, and who was now advancing through the grove, was about forty years of age, a small, delicate-looking man, very carelessly dressed. He was singularly ugly, too, but his ugliness was of the clever, good-humoured type. His name was Dufour; he practised medicine at Pont Brillant, and, by dint of skill and unremitting attention, he had cured Frederick of a serious illness the year before.

"How do you do, my dear Madame Bastien?" he said, cheerfully, as he approached the pair. "How do you do, my boy?" he added, pressing Frederick's hand cordially.

"Ah, doctor, you came just in time to get scolded," exclaimed Madame Bastien, with affectionate gaiety.

"Scolded?"

"Certainly. Isn't it more than a fortnight since you came to see us?"

"Fie! fie!" cried M. Dufour, "you must be egotistical to demand a doctor's visits with health as flourishing as yours."

"Fie!" retorted Madame Bastien, no less gaily, "and what right have you, pray, to so disdain the gratitude of those you have saved as to deprive them of the pleasure of saying to him often, very often,'Thank you, my preserver, thank you'?"

"Yes, my mother is right, M. Dufour," added Frederick. "You think because you have restored me to life that all is over between us. How ungrateful you are!"

"If mother and son have both declared war upon me, there is nothing left for me but to beat a retreat," exclaimed the doctor, drawing back a step or two.

"Oh, well, we will not take an unfair advantage; but only upon one condition, doctor. That is that you will dine with us."

"I left home with that very laudable intention," replied the doctor, quite seriously this time, "but just as I was leaving Pont Brillant, a woman stopped me and begged me to come at once to her son. I did so, but unfortunately his malady is of such a serious character that I shall not feel easy in mind if I do not see my patient again before seven o'clock."

"Of course I can make no protest under circumstances like these, my dear doctor," replied Madame Bastien, "and I am doubly grateful to you for granting us a few moments."

"And I have been looking forward to such a delightful evening," remarked the doctor. "It would have rounded out my day so well, for this morning I had a most delightful surprise."

"So some unexpected piece of good fortune has befallen you, my dear doctor. How glad I am!"

"Yes," replied the doctor; "for some time past I have been extremely uneasy about my best friend, an inveterate traveller, who had undertaken a dangerous journey through some of the least known portions of South America. Having heard nothing from him for more than eight months, I

was beginning to feel very much alarmed, when this morning I received a letter from him written in London, where he had stopped for a few days on his return from Lima. He promises to come and spend some time with me, so you can judge how delighted I am, my dear Madame Bastien. He is like a brother to me, and not only has the best heart in the world, but is one of the most interesting as well as the most gifted men I know. What a pleasure it will be to have him all to myself!"

Here the doctor was interrupted by an elderly servant woman, who was leading a poorly clad child of seven or eight years by the hand, and who, from the threshold of the door where she was standing, called to the youth:

"It is six o'clock, M. Frederick."

"I'll see you again presently, mother," said the lad, kissing his young mother on the forehead.

Then, turning to the doctor, he added:

"I shall see you, too, doctor, before you go, shall I not?"

After which he hastily joined the child and old servant, and entered the house in company with them.

"Where is he going?" asked the doctor.

"To give his lesson. Didn't you see his scholar?"

"What scholar?"

"That child is the son of a day labourer who lives too far from Pont Brillant to be able to send his child to the village school, so Frederick is teaching the little fellow to read. He gives him two lessons a day, and I assure you that I am as well pleased with the teacher as with the pupil, doctor, for Frederick displays in his teaching a zeal, patience, and sweetness of disposition that delights me."

"It is certainly a very nice thing for him to do."

"We are obliged to do good in these small ways, you see, doctor," said Madame Bastien, with a rather sad smile. "You know with what rigid parsimony my son and I are treated in regard to money matters. Still, I should not complain. Thanks to this parsimony, Frederick devises all sorts of expedients. Some of them are, I assure you, very touching, and if I were not afraid of showing too much pride, I would tell you something that occurred last week."

"Go on, my dear Madame Bastien; surely you are not going to try to play the mock modest mother with me."

"No, I am not, so listen. Last Thursday Frederick and I walked over to Brevan heath – "

"Where they are clearing up some land. I noticed that fact as I passed there this morning."

"Yes, and you know that is pretty hard work, doctor."

"I should say that it was. Digging up roots and stumps that have been there three or four centuries."

"Well, while I was walking about with Frederick, we saw a poor, hungry-looking woman, with a little girl about ten years old, as pale and emaciated-looking as her mother, working there on the heath."

"A woman and a child of that age! Why, such work was entirely beyond their strength."

"You are right, doctor, and in spite of their courage, the poor creatures were making little or no headway. It was almost as much as the poor mother could do to lift the heavy spade, much less to force it into the hard earth, and when the root of a sapling at which she must have been digging a long time became partially uncovered, the woman and child, now using the spade as a lever, now digging in the ground with their hands, endeavoured to loosen the root, but in vain. Seeing how utterly futile their efforts were, the poor woman made an almost despairing movement, then threw herself down on the ground as if overcome with grief and fatigue, and covering her head with her tattered apron, she began to sob bitterly, while the child, kneeling beside her, also wept pitifully."

"Ah! such poverty as that!"

"I looked at my son. There were tears in his eyes as well as my own. I approached the poor woman and asked her how it happened that she was trying to do work so much beyond her strength,

and she told me that her husband had contracted to clear up one quarter of the land, that he had become ill from overwork a couple of days before, that some of the work was still to be done, but that if the job was not finished by Saturday night, he would lose the fruit of nearly a fortnight's labour, for it was on these terms that her husband had undertaken the job, the work being urgent."

"Such contracts are frequently made, and unless the conditions are scrupulously complied with, the poor delinquents have to suffer, I am sorry to say. So the poor woman was trying to take her husband's place, I suppose."

"Yes, for it was a question of making or losing thirty-five francs upon which they were counting to pay the yearly rental of their miserable hovel, and purchase a little rye to live upon until the next harvest. After a few minutes' reflection Frederick said to the poor woman: 'I should think a good worker could finish the job in a couple of days, my good woman.' 'Yes, monsieur, but my husband is too ill to do it,' she replied. 'These poor people mustn't lose their thirty-five francs, mother,' Frederick said to me. 'They must have the money and we cannot afford to give it to them, so let me off from my studies on Friday and Saturday and I will finish the work for them. The poor woman won't run the risk of making herself ill. She can stay at home and nurse her husband, and Sunday she will get her money.'"

"Frederick is a noble boy!" exclaimed M. Dufour.

"Saturday evening just at dusk the task was completed," Madame Bastien continued. "Frederick performed the work with an ardour and cheerfulness which showed that it was a real pleasure to him. I stayed with him all during the two days. There was a big juniper-tree only a little way off, and I sat in the shade of that and read or embroidered while my son worked; and how he worked! such vigorous blows of the spade as he struck, the very earth trembled under my feet."

"I can well believe it; though he is rather slim, he is remarkably strong for one of his years."

"I took him water now and then, and to save time when lunch-time came, our old Marguerite brought us out something to eat. How happy we were eating out there on the heath under the shade of the juniper. Frederick enjoyed it immensely. Of course there was nothing so very wonderful about what he did, but what touched and pleased me was the promptness with which he made the resolution, and the perseverance and tenacity of will with which he carried it out."

"You are, indeed, the happiest of mothers," said the doctor with genuine emotion, pressing Marie's hands warmly, "and you have reason to be doubly happy, as this happiness is your own work."

"What else could you expect, doctor?" replied Madame Bastien, artlessly. "One lives for one's son you know."

"You most assuredly do," said the doctor, warmly, "and it is well for you that you do, as but for him – " but M. Dufour checked himself suddenly as if he had been about to say something that would be better left unsaid.

"You are right, my dear doctor, but now I think of it, didn't you say something about a proposition you were going to make to Frederick and me?"

"True, it is this: you know, or rather you do not know – for you hear very little of the neighbourhood gossip – that the Château de Pont Brillant has recently undergone a thorough renovation."

"I am so little *au courant* with the gossip of the neighbourhood, as you say, that this is the first intimation I have had of the fact. I even thought that the château was closed."

"It will not be much longer, for the young marquis is coming down to occupy it with his grandmother."

"This is the son of the M. de Pont Brillant who died about three years ago, I suppose. He must be very young."

"About Frederick's age. His father and mother are both dead, but his grandmother idolises him and she has gone to fabulous expense to refurnish the château, where she will hereafter spend eight or nine months of the year with her grandson. I was called to the castle a few days ago to attend M.

le chef of the conservatories – for these great people do not say gardener; that would be entirely too common – and I was dazzled by the luxury and splendour that pervaded the immense establishment. There is a magnificent picture gallery, a palm house through which one could drive in a carriage, and superb statues in the gardens. Above all – but I want to have the pleasure of surprising you, so I will only say that the place rivals any of the magnificent palaces described in the Arabian Nights. I feel sure that you and Frederick would enjoy seeing all the wonders of this fairy-land, and thanks to the consideration which M. le chef of the gardens and conservatories accords me, I can take you through the chateau to-morrow or the day after, but no later, as the young marquis is expected the day following that. What do you say to the proposition?"

"I accept it with pleasure, doctor. It will be a great treat to Frederick, whose wonder will be the greater as he has no idea that any such splendour exists in the world. So I thank you most heartily. We shall have a delightful day."

"Very well. When shall we go?"

"To-morrow, if it suits you."

"Perfectly; I will make my round very early in the morning, so I can get here by nine o'clock. It will take us only about half an hour to reach the château, as there is a short cut through the forest."

"And after we leave the château we can breakfast in the woods upon some fruit we will take with us," said Madame Bastien, gaily. "I will tell Marguerite to make one of those cakes you like so much, my dear doctor."

"I consent on condition that the cake is a big one," replied the doctor, laughing, "for however large it may be, Frederick and I are sure to make a big hole in it."

"You need have no fears on that score. You shall both have plenty of cake. But here comes Frederick; the lesson must be over. I will leave you the pleasure of surprising him."

"Oh, mother, how delightful!" exclaimed the lad, when M. Dufour had informed him of his project. "Thank you, thank you, my dear doctor, for having planned this charming journey into fairy-land."

The doctor was punctual the next day, and he and Madame Bastien and her son started through the forest for the Château de Pont Brillant in all the fresh glory of a superb summer morning.

CHAPTER III

THE approach to the castle was through a broad avenue nearly half a mile long, bordered by a double row of gigantic elms probably four centuries old. A broad esplanade, ornamented with enormous orange-trees in boxes, and bordered with a massive stone balustrade extended across the entire front of the château, afforded a superb view of the surrounding country, and served as a court of honour for the castle, which was a *chef d'œuvre* of the renaissance type of architecture, with big cylindrical cone-roofed towers with highly decorated dormer windows, and tall chimneys that strongly reminded the beholder of the grand yet fairy-like ensemble of the famous Château de Chambord.

Frederick and his mother had never seen this imposing structure before except at a distance, and on reaching the middle of the broad esplanade they both paused, struck with admiration as they viewed all these marvellous details and the rich carvings and traceries of stone, the existence of which they had never even suspected before, while the good doctor, as pleased as if the château had belonged to him, rubbed his hands joyfully, as he complacently exclaimed:

"Oh, the outside is nothing; just wait until you have entered this enchanted palace."

"Oh, mother," cried Frederick, "look at that colonnade at the base of the main tower; how light and airy it is!"

"And those balconies," responded his mother, "one would almost think they were made of lace! And the ornamentations on those window-caps, how elaborate yet how delicate they are."

"I declare we sha'n't get away from the château before to-morrow if we waste so much time admiring the walls," protested the doctor.

"M. Dufour is right. Come, Frederick," said Marie, taking her son's arm.

"And those buildings which look like another château connected with the main buildings by circular wings, what are they?" asked the youth, turning to the doctor.

"The stables and servants' quarters, my boy."

"Stables!" exclaimed Madame Bastien. "Impossible! You must be mistaken, my dear doctor."

"What! you have no more confidence than that in your cicerone!" exclaimed the doctor. "You will find that I am right, madame. There are so many stalls in the stable that when the great-grandfather, or great-great-grandfather of the present marquis lived here, he kept a regiment of cavalry here, horses and men at his own expense, just for the pleasure of seeing them go through their manœuvres every morning before breakfast on the esplanade. It seemed to give the worthy man an appetite."

"It was a whim worthy of a great soldier like him," said Marie. "You recollect with what interest we read the history of his Italian campaign last winter, do you not, Frederick?"

"I should think I did remember," exclaimed Frederick, enthusiastically. "Next to Charles XII., the Maréchal de Pont Brillant is my favourite hero."

Meanwhile the three visitors had crossed the esplanade, and Madame Bastien, seeing M. Dufour turn to the right instead of keeping straight on toward the front of the building, remarked:

"But, doctor, it seems to me that the heavily carved door in front of us must lead into the inner courtyard."

"So it does; the grand personages enter by that door, but plebeians, like ourselves, are lucky to get in the back way," replied the doctor, laughing. "I should like to see M. le Suisse take the trouble to open that armorial door for us."

"I ask your pardon for my absurd pretensions," said Madame Bastien, gaily, while Frederick, making a sort of comical salute to the superb entrance, said, laughingly:

"Ah, manorial doorway, we are only too well aware that you were not made for us!"

M. Dufour, having rung at the servants' entrance and asked to see M. Dutilleul, head superintendent of the gardens and conservatories, the party was admitted into the courtyard. To reach

M. Dutilleul's house, it was necessary to cross one of the stable-yards. About thirty riding, hunting, and carriage horses belonging to the young marquis had arrived the evening before, and a number of English grooms and hostlers were bustling in and out of the stables, some washing carriages, others polishing bits and stirrups until they shone like burnished silver, all under the vigilant eye of the chef of the stables, an elderly Englishman, who, with a cigar between his lips, was presiding over this work with truly British phlegm, cane in hand.

Suddenly, pointing to a massive gate that had just turned slowly upon its hinges, the doctor exclaimed:

"See, there come some more horses! A whole regiment of them. One would think we were living in the old marshal's time, Madame Bastien."

About twenty-five more horses, of different ages and sizes, all concealed in blankets bearing the marquis's coat-of-arms, some ridden, some led, began to file through the archway. Their dusty legs and housings indicated that they had just made a long journey. A handsome calèche, drawn by two spirited horses, ended the procession. A handsomely dressed young man alighted from it, and gave some order in English to one of the grooms, who listened, cap in hand.

"Do the horses that just came also belong to M. le marquis, my friend?" the doctor inquired of a passing servant.

"Yes, they are M. le marquis's racers and brood mares."

"And the gentleman that just got out of the carriage?"

"Is M. Newman, M. le marquis's trainer."

As the three visitors walked on toward the conservatories, they passed a long passage in the basement. This passage evidently led to the kitchens, for eight or ten cooks and scullions were engaged in unpacking several hogsheads filled with copper cooking utensils so prodigious in size that they seemed to have been made for Gargantua himself. The visitors also viewed, with ever increasing astonishment, the incredible number of servants of every kind.

"Well, Madame Bastien, if any one should tell this young marquis that you and I and a host of other people had only one or two servants to wait on us, and yet were tolerably well served, he would probably laugh in his face," remarked M. Dufour.

"So much pomp and luxury bewilders me," replied Marie. "Why, there is a little town right here in the château, and think of all those horses! You will not want for models after this, Frederick. You are so fond of drawing horses, but up to this time you have had only our venerable cart-horse for a model."

"Really, mother, I had no idea that any one save the king, perhaps, was rich enough to have such an immense number of servants and horses," replied Frederick. "Great Heavens! what a host of people and animals to be devoted to the service or pleasure of a single person!"

The words were uttered in an ironical tone, but Madame Bastien did not notice the fact, being so deeply interested as well as amused by what she saw going on around her; nor had she noticed that her son's features had contracted slightly several times, as if under the influence of some disagreeable impression.

The fact is, though Frederick was not a particularly close observer, he had been struck with the lack of respect shown to his mother and the doctor by this crowd of noisy and busy domestics; some had jostled the visitors as they passed, others had rudely obstructed the way, others, surprised at Marie Bastien's rare beauty, had stared at her with bold, almost insulting curiosity, facts which the young mother in her unconsciousness had entirely failed to notice.

Not so with her son, however, and seeing that his mother, the doctor, and himself were thus treated simply because they had owed their admission to a servant, and sought admission at the servants' entrance, Frederick's admiration became tinged with a slight bitterness, the bitterness that had caused his ironical comment on the number of persons and horses devoted to the pleasure and service of a single individual.

The sight of the magnificent gardens through which they were obliged to pass to reach the greenhouses soon made the lad forget his bitterness. The gardeners were no less numerous than the subordinates in the various other departments, and by inquiring for M. le chef of the gardens and conservatories, the visitors finally ascertained that this important personage was in the main conservatory.

This building, which was circular in form, was two hundred feet in diameter, with a conical roof, the apex of which rose to a height of forty feet. This gigantic conservatory, constructed of iron, with remarkable boldness yet lightness of design, was filled with the most superb exotics. Banana-trees of all sizes and kinds, from the dwarf musa to the paradisiaca, rose to a height of thirty feet, with leaves many of them two yards in length. Here the green fans of the date-palm mingled with the tall stems of the sugar-cane and bamboos, while the clear water in a huge marble basin in the centre of the conservatory reflected all sorts of aquatic plants, among them great arums from India, with enormous round leaves, tall cyperus with their waving plumes, and the lotus of the Nile, with its immense azure flowers so intoxicating in their fragrance. A marvellous variety of vegetation of every shape and kind and colour had been collected here, from the pale mottled green of the begonia, to the richest hues of the maranta, with its wonderful leaves of green velvet underneath and purple satin on top; tall ficus side by side with ferns so delicate that the lace-like foliage seemed to be supported with thin strands of violet silk; here a strelitzia, with a flower that looked like a bird with orange wings and a lapis lazuli crest, vied in splendour with the astrapea, with its enormous cerise pompon, flecked with gold, while in many places the immense leaves of the banana-trees formed a natural arch which so effectually concealed the glass roof of the rotunda from view that one might have supposed oneself in a tropical forest.

Marie Bastien and Frederick interchanged exclamations of surprise and admiration at every step.

"Ah, Frederick, how delightful it is to see and touch these banana-trees and date-palms, we have read of so often in books of travel," cried Marie.

"Mother, mother, here is the coffee-tree," exclaimed Frederick, in his turn, "and there, that plant with such thick leaves, climbing up that column, is the vanilla."

"Frederick, look at those immense latania leaves. It is easy to understand now that in India five or six leaves are enough to cover a cabin."

"And mother, look, there is the beautiful passion-vine Captain Cook speaks of. I recognised it at once by the flowers; they look like little openwork china baskets, and yet you and I used to accuse the poor captain of inventing impossible flowers."

"M. de Pont Brillant must spend most of his time in this enchanted garden when he is at home," Marie Bastien remarked to the superintendent.

"M. le marquis is like the late marquis, his father," replied the gardener. "He doesn't care much for flowers. He prefers the stable and kennels."

Madame Bastien and her son gazed at each other in amazement.

"Then, why does he have these magnificent conservatories, monsieur?" inquired the young woman, ingenuously.

"Because every castle must have its conservatories, madame," replied the functionary, proudly. "It is a luxury every self-respecting nobleman owes to himself."

"So it is purely a matter of self-respect," Marie remarked to her son in a whispered aside. "But all jesting aside, in winter, when the days are so short, and the snow is flying, what delightful hours one could spend here, safe from the frost."

At last the doctor was obliged to interfere.

"My dear madame, we shall have to spend at least a couple of days in the conservatory, at this rate," he exclaimed, laughing.

"That is true, doctor," replied Madame Bastien, smiling; then, with a sigh of regret, she added: "Come, let us leave the tropics, – for some other part of the world, I suppose, as you told me this was a land of wonders, M. Dufour."

"You thought I was jesting. Well, you shall see. If you are very good, I will now take you to China."

"To China?"

"Certainly, and after remaining there a quarter of an hour we will make a little excursion to Switzerland."

"And what then, doctor?"

"Well, when there are no more foreign lands to visit, we will inspect all the different eras from the Gothic age down to the days of Louis the Fifteenth, and all in an hour's time."

"Nothing can surprise me now, doctor," replied Madame Bastien, "for I know for a certainty, now, that we are in fairy-land. Come, Frederick."

And the visitors followed M. le chef of the gardens and conservatories, who smiled rather superciliously at the plebeian amazement of M. Dufour's friends. Though the wonders of the conservatory had made Frederick forget his bitter feelings for a time, the lad followed his mother with a less buoyant step than usual, for the bitterness returned as he thought of the young Marquis de Pont Brillant's indifference to the beauties that would have given such joy and delight and congenial occupation to the many persons capable of appreciating the treasures collected here at such prodigious expense.

CHAPTER IV

ON leaving the immense rotunda which formed the principal conservatory, the head gardener conducted the visitors into other hothouses built on either side of the main structure. One of these, used as a pinery, led to another conservatory devoted entirely to orchids, and, in spite of the humidity and stifling heat, the doctor had considerable difficulty in tearing Marie Bastien and her son away from the spot, so great was their wonder and astonishment at the sight of these beautiful but almost fantastic flowers, some strongly resembling huge butterflies in shape and colouring, others, winged insects of the most fantastic appearance. Here M. Dutilleul's domain ended, but he was kind enough to express a willingness to conduct our friends through the orangery and grapery.

"I promised you China," the doctor said to his friends, "and here we are in China."

In fact, as they left the orchid house, they found themselves in a gallery, with columns painted a bright green and scarlet, and paved with porcelain blocks which were continued up the low wall that served as a support for the base of the columns. Between these columns stood immense blue, white, and gold vases, containing camellias, peonies, azaleas, and lemon-trees. This gallery, which was enclosed with glass in winter, led to a small Chinese house which formed the centre of a large winter-garden.

The construction of this house, which had cost infinite care and an immense outlay of money, dated back to the middle of the eighteenth century, when the rage for everything Chinese was at its height, as the famous Chanteloup pagoda, a very tall building, constructed entirely of china, testifies.

The Chinese house at Pont Brillant was no whit inferior to M. de Choiseul's famous "folly." The arrangement of this dwelling, which consisted of several rooms, the hangings, furniture, ornaments, and household utensils, were all strictly authentic, and to complete the illusion, two wonderful wax figures, life-size, stood on either side of the drawing-room door, as if to welcome their visitors, to whom they ever and anon bowed, thanks to some internal mechanism that made them move their eyes from side to side, and alternately raise and incline their heads. The choicest and most curious specimens of lacquer work, richly embroidered stuffs, furniture, china, gold and silver articles, and ivory carvings had been collected in this sort of museum.

"How wonderful!" exclaimed Madame Bastien, examining all these treasures with great curiosity and interest. "See, Frederick, here is a living book in which one can study the customs, habits, and history of this singular country, for here is also a collection of medals, coins, drawings, and manuscripts."

"Say, mother!" exclaimed Frederick, "how pleasantly and profitably one could spend the long winter evenings here in reading about China, and comparing, or rather verifying the descriptions in the book with nature, so to speak."

"M. de Pont Brillant must often visit this curious and interesting pavilion, I am sure," said Marie, turning to M. Dutilleul.

"M. le marquis has never been a victim to the Chinese craze, madame," was the reply. "He likes hunting much better. It was his great-grandfather who had this house built, because it was the fashion at that time, that is all."

Marie could not help shrugging her shoulders the least bit in the world, and exchanging a half-smile with her son, who seemed to become more and more thoughtful as he followed his mother, to whom the doctor had offered his arm to conduct her along a winding path leading from the winter-garden to a rocky grotto, lighted by large, lens-shaped pieces of blue glass inserted in the rocks, which imparted to this subterranean chamber, ornamented with beautiful sea-shells and coral, a pale light similar to that which pervades the depths of the ocean.

"We are going to the home of the water-nymphs now, are we not?" asked Madame Bastien, gaily, as she began the descent. "Isn't some mermaid coming to welcome us upon the threshold of her watery empire?"

"Nothing of the kind," replied the doctor. "This subterranean passage, carpeted, as you see, and always kept warm during the winter, leads to the château; for you must have noticed that all the different buildings we have seen are connected by covered passages, so in winter one can go from one to the other without fearing rain or cold."

In fact, this grotto was connected, by a spiral staircase, with the end of a long gallery called the Guards' Hall, and which in years gone by had probably served for that purpose. Ten windows of stained glass, with the Pont Brillant coat-of-arms emblazoned upon them, lighted this immense room finished in richly carved oak, with a sky ceiling divided by heavy groins of carved oak.

Ten figures in complete suits of armour, helmet on head, visor down, halberd in hand, sword at side, were ranged in line on the other side of the gallery, facing, and directly opposite the ten windows, where the reflection from the stained glass cast prismatic lights upon the steel armour, making it stand out in vivid relief against the dark woodwork.

In the middle of this hall, upon a pedestal, was a knight, also in a complete suit of armour, mounted upon a battle-steed hewn out of wood, which was entirely hidden by its steel bards and long, richly emblazoned trappings. The knight's armour, which was heavily embossed with gold, was a marvel of the goldsmith's art and of elaborate ornamentation, and M. le chef of the conservatories, pausing in front of the figure, said with a certain amount of family pride:

"This suit of armour was worn by Raoul IV., Sire de Pont Brillant, during the First Crusade, which proves beyond a doubt that the nobility of M. le marquis is of no recent date."

Just then an elderly man, dressed in black, having opened one of the massive doors of the hall, M. Dutilleul remarked to Doctor Dufour:

"Ah, doctor, here is M. Legris, the keeper of the silver. He is a friend of mine. I will ask him to show you about. He will prove a much better guide than I should be."

And advancing toward the old man, M. Dutilleul said:

"My dear Legris, here are some friends of mine who would like to see the castle. I am going to hand them over to you, and in return, whenever any of your acquaintances wish to inspect the hothouses – "

"Our friends' friends are our friends, Dutilleul," replied the keeper of the silver, rather, peremptorily; then, with a rather familiar gesture, he motioned the visitors to follow him into the apartments which a large corps of servants had just finished putting in order.

It would take entirely too long to enumerate all the splendid adornments of this castle, or rather, palace, from the library, which many a large town might have envied, to a superb picture gallery, containing many of the finest specimens of both the old and the modern school of art, upon which the visitors could only cast a hasty glance, for, in spite of the obliging promise made to M. Dutilleul, the keeper of the castle silver seemed rather impatient to get rid of his charges.

The first floor, as M. Dufour had said, consisted of an extensive suite of apartments, each of which might have served as an illustration of some particular epoch in interior decoration between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries; in short, it was a veritable museum, though of an essentially private character, by reason of the many family portraits and the valuable relics of every sort and kind which had belonged to different members of this great and ancient house.

In one of the wings on the second floor were the apartments of the dowager Marquise de Pont Brillant. In spite of that lady's advanced age, these rooms had been newly fitted up in the daintiest, most coquettish style imaginable. There was a profusion of lace and gilding and costly brocades, as well as of elaborately carved rosewood furniture, and superb ornaments of Sevres and Dresden china. The bedchamber, hung with pink and white brocade, with a canopied bedstead decorated with big bunches of white ostrich feathers, was especially charming. The dressing-room was really a ravishing

boudoir hung with pale blue satin, studded with marguerites. In the middle of this room, furnished in gilded rosewood, like the adjoining bedchamber, was a magnificent dressing-table, draped with costly lace caught back with knots of ribbon, and covered with toilet articles, some of wrought gold, others of sky-blue Sevres.

Our three friends had just entered this apartment when a haughty, arrogant-looking man appeared in the doorway. This personage, who wore a bit of red ribbon in the buttonhole of his long frock coat, was nothing more or less than my lord steward of the castle and surrounding domain.

On seeing the three strangers, this high and mighty personage frowned with an intensely surprised and displeased air.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded, imperiously, of his subordinate, M. Legris. "Why are you not attending to your silver? Who are these people?"

On hearing these discourteous words, Madame Bastien turned scarlet with confusion, the little doctor straightened himself up to his full height, and Frederick rashly muttered, under his breath, "Insolent creature!" as he stepped a little closer to his mother.

Madame Bastien gave her son's hand a warning pressure, as she slightly shrugged her shoulder as if to show her disdain.

"They are some friends of Dutilleul's, M. Desmazures," replied M. Legris, humbly. "He asked me to take them through the chateau, and – and I thought – "

"Why, this is outrageous!" exclaimed the steward, interrupting him. "I never heard of such assurance. Such a thing wouldn't be allowed in the house of a tradesman on the Rue St. Denis! The idea of taking the first person that comes along into the apartments of madame la marquise, in this fashion."

"Monsieur," said Doctor Dufour, firmly, walking toward the steward, "Madame Bastien, her son, and myself, who am M. Dutilleul's physician, thought we were committing no indiscretion – nor were we – in accepting an offer to show us the château. I have visited several royal residences, monsieur, and think it well to inform you that I have always been politely treated by the person in charge of them."

"That is very possible, monsieur," answered the steward, dryly, "but you doubtless applied to some person who was authorised to give it, for permission to visit these royal residences. You should have addressed a written application to me, the steward, and the sole master here in M. le marquis's absence."

"We must beg monsieur to kindly pardon our ignorance of these formalities," said Madame Bastien, with a mocking smile, as if to show her son how little she minded this pompous functionary's discourtesy.

She took Frederick's arm as she spoke.

"If I had been more familiar with the usages of monsieur's administration," added the doctor, with a sarcastic smile, "monsieur would have received a respectful request that in his omnipotent goodness he would kindly grant us permission to inspect the château."

"Is that intended as a jest, monsieur?" demanded the steward, angrily.

"Somewhat, monsieur," replied the little doctor.

The irascible functionary took a step forward.

"In order not to close this conversation with a jest, monsieur," interposed Madame Bastien, turning to the steward, "permit me to say in all seriousness, monsieur, that I have often read that the house of any great nobleman could always be recognised by the urbanity of his hirelings."

"Well, madame?"

"Well, monsieur, it seems to me that you must desire to prove this rule – by the exception."

It is impossible to describe the perfect dignity with which Marie Bastien gave this well-deserved lesson to the arrogant hireling, who bit his lip with rage, unable to utter a word, whereupon Marie, taking the doctor's arm, gaily remarked to her companions:

"You should not manifest so much surprise. Don't you know that one often meets with evil spirits in enchanted countries? It is a satisfaction to know that they are nearly always of an inferior order. Let us hasten away with recollections of these wonders which the evil genius cannot spoil."

A few minutes afterward Madame Bastien, Frederick, and the doctor left the castle. Marie, out of consideration for the doctor, who seemed greatly pained at this contretemps, as well as by reason of her natural good nature, bore her share of their mutual discomfiture cheerfully, even gaily, and laughed not a little at the absurdly important airs the steward had given himself. M. Dufour, who cared nothing about the man's rudeness except so far as it might affect Madame Bastien, soon recovered his natural good spirits when he saw how little importance his fair companion seemed to attach to the affair.

A quarter of an hour afterward the three friends were sitting in the shade of a clump of gigantic oaks, enjoying their lunch. Frederick, though he manifested some little constraint of manner, seemed to share his companions' high spirits, but Marie, too clear-sighted not to notice that her son was not exactly himself, fancied she could divine the cause of his preoccupation, and teased him a little about the importance he seemed to attach to the steward's impertinence.

"Come, come, my handsome Cid, my valiant cavalier," she said, gaily, "keep your anger and your trusty blade for an adversary worthy of you. The doctor and I both gave the ill-bred fellow a good lesson. Now let us think only of ending the day as pleasantly as possible, and of the pleasure it will give us for weeks to come to talk of the treasures of every kind that we have seen."

Then, with a laugh, the young mother added:

"Say, Frederick, don't forget to-morrow morning to tell old Andre, M. le chef of our open-air garden, not to forget to bring us a bouquet of lilies of the valley and violets."

"Yes, mother," answered Frederick, smiling.

"And I wish you would also have the goodness to tell M. le chef of our stables to harness our venerable white horse in the afternoon, as we must go to the village to do some shopping."

"And I, madame," exclaimed the doctor, with his mouth full of cake, "take great pleasure in assuring you, or, rather, I should say, in proving to you that your old Marguerite, the chef of your culinary department, is a none-such, so far as cake-making is concerned, – for this cake is certainly – "

But the good doctor did not finish the sentence, as he choked badly in his effort to talk and eat at the same time.

So with gay jests and laughter the meal went on, and Frederick tried his best to share his companions' hilarity; but the lad's mirth was constrained, he was conscious of a strange and increasing feeling of annoyance. As certain vague and inexplicable symptoms presage the invasion of a still latent malady, so certain vague and inexplicable sentiments seemed to be germinating in Frederick's heart. The nature of these sentiments, though as yet not very clearly defined, caused him a feeling of instinctive shame, so much so, in fact, that he, who had always been so confiding with his mother, now dreaded her penetration for the first time in his life, and deliberately set to work to deceive her by feigning all the rest of the day a gaiety that he was far from feeling.

CHAPTER V

SEVERAL days had passed since the visit to the Château de Pont Brillant. Frederick had never left his mother's house to visit the homes of persons of an even humbler station than his own, so the impression which the sight of the splendours and the almost royal luxury that pervaded it had made upon him had suffered no diminution. When, on the following morning, the lad awoke in his own little room, it seemed bare and comfortless to him, and when he afterward went as usual to bid his mother good morning, he involuntarily compared the costly elegance of the Marquise de Pont Brillant's apartments with the poverty of his mother's surroundings, and experienced a strange sinking of heart.

An unlucky chance deepened this impression. When Frederick entered his mother's room, the young woman, in all the freshness of her marvellous beauty, was arranging her beautiful brown hair in front of a cheap painted toilet-table covered with oilcloth and surmounted by a tiny glass with a black frame.

Frederick, remembering the rich lace and satin and gold that adorned the dressing-room of the dowager marquise, experienced for the first time in his life a bitter pang of envy, as he said to himself:

"Doesn't that elegant, luxurious boudoir I saw at the castle seem much better suited to a beautiful and charming woman like my mother than to a wrinkled octogenarian who, in her ridiculous vanity, wants to admire her withered face in mirrors wreathed with lace and ribbons!"

Already strangely depressed in spirits, Frederick went out into the garden. The morning was perfect, and the dew on the petals of the flowers glistened like pearls in the bright July sunshine. Heretofore the lad, like his mother, had often gone into ecstasies over the beauty, freshness, and exquisite perfume of some specially fine rose; the snowy petals of the Easter flowers, the velvety petals of the pansies, and the exquisite delicacy of the acacia had always excited his lively admiration, but now he had only careless, almost disdainful looks for these simple flowers, as he thought of the rare and magnificent tropical plants that filled the spacious conservatories of the château. The grove of venerable oaks, enlivened by the gay warbling of birds that seemed to be replying to the soft murmur of the little waterfall, was also viewed with disdain. How insignificant these things appeared in comparison with the magnificent grounds of the chateau, adorned with rare statues and superb fountains peopled with bronze naiads and Tritons sending great jets of water as high as the tree-tops.

Absorbed in thoughts like these, Frederick walked slowly on until he reached the edge of the grove. There he paused and gazed mechanically around him, then gave a sudden start, and turned abruptly, as he perceived in the distance the château standing out clearly against the horizon in the bright light of the rising sun. At the sight of it Frederick hastily retreated into the shadows of the grove, but, alas! though he could thus close his bodily eyes to this resplendent vision, the lad's too faithful memory kept the wonders that had so impressed him continually before his mental vision, inducing comparisons which poisoned the simple pleasures of the past, until now so full of charm.

As he passed the open door of the stable, a superannuated farm horse which was sometimes harnessed to a sort of chaise, Madame Bastien's only equipage, whinnied in his stall for the crusts of bread that he had been in the habit of receiving every morning from his young master.

Frederick had forgotten to bring the crusts that morning, and to atone for his forgetfulness, he tore up a big handful of fresh grass and offered it to his faithful old friend, but suddenly remembering the magnificent blooded horses he had seen at the castle, he smiled bitterly and turned brusquely away from the old horse, who, with the grass still between his teeth, watched his young master for a long time with an expression of almost human intelligence.

Soon afterward an old and infirm woman, to whom Frederick, having no money, gave bread and fruit every week, came to the house as usual.

"Here, my good mother," he said, as he presented his usual offering, "I wish I could do more for you, but my mother and I have no money."

"You are very kind all the same, M. Bastien," replied the woman, "but I shall not be obliged to ask anything of you much longer."

"Why not?"

"Why, you see, M. Bastien, that M. le marquis is coming to live at the castle, and these great noblemen are very generous with their money, and I hope to get my share. Your servant, M. Bastien."

Frederick blushed for the first time at the humble gift he had made heretofore with such pleasure and contentment, so shortly afterward, when another beggar accosted him, he said:

"You would only sneer at what I can give you. Apply to M. le marquis. He should act as a benefactor to the entire neighbourhood. He is so rich!"

That such bitter envy should have taken such sudden but absolute possession of Frederick's heart seems strange indeed to those who know his past, yet this apparent anomaly can be easily explained.

Madame Bastien's son had been reared in an exceedingly modest home, but his mother's taste and refinement had imbued even these plain surroundings with an air of elegance and distinction, and, thanks to a thousand nothings, the ensemble had been charming.

The love of beauty and elegance thus developed rendered Frederick peculiarly susceptible to the charm of the wonders he had seen at the castle, and the longing to possess them naturally corresponded with his appreciation and admiration.

If, on the contrary, Frederick's life had been spent amid rough and coarse surroundings, he would have been more amazed than surprised at the treasures which the château contained, and, ignorant of the refined enjoyment that could be derived from them, he would have been much less likely to envy the fortunate possessor of them.

Madame Bastien soon perceived the change that was gradually taking place in her son, and that manifested itself in frequent fits of melancholy. The humble home no longer resounded with peals of laughter as in days gone by. When his studies were over, Frederick picked up a book and read during the entire recreation hour, but more than once Madame Bastien noticed that her son's eyes remained fixed upon the same page for a quarter of an hour.

Her anxiety increasing, Madame Bastien remarked to her son: "My son, you seem so grave and taciturn and preoccupied, you are not nearly as lively as formerly."

"True, mother," replied Frederick, forcing a smile, "I am sometimes surprised myself at the more serious turn my mind is taking. Still, it is not at all astonishing. I am no longer a child. It is quite time for me to be getting sensible."

Frederick had never lied before, but he was lying now. Up to this time he had always confessed his faults to his mother. She had been the confidant of his every thought, but the mere idea of confessing or of allowing her to discover the bitter feelings which his visit to the Château de Pont Brillant had excited in his breast filled him with shame and dismay. In fact, he would rather have died than confess that he was enduring the torments of envy; so, placed upon his guard by Madame Bastien's lively solicitude, he devoted all his powers of mind and strength of will to conceal the wound that was beginning to rankle in his soul, but it is almost certain that his attempts to deceive his mother's tender sagacity would have proved futile had that mother not been at the same time reassured and deceived by Doctor Dufour.

"Don't be alarmed," the physician said to her when she, in all sincerity, consulted him on the subject of her fears. "At the time of puberty, an entire change often takes place in a youth's character. The gayest and most demonstrative often become the most gloomy and taciturn. They experience the most unreasonable melancholy, the most acute anxiety. They give way to fits of profound depression, and feel an intense longing for solitude. So do not be alarmed, and above all give no sign of having noticed this change in your son. This almost inevitable crisis will be over in a few months, and you will then see Frederick himself again. He will have a different voice, that is all."

Doctor Dufour's mistake was the more excusable as the symptoms which so alarmed Madame Bastien strongly resembled those which are often noticed in youths at that age; so Madame Bastien accepted this explanation, as she could not divine the real cause of this change in Frederick.

This change had not manifested itself immediately after the visit to the chateau. It had, on the contrary, taken place gradually, almost imperceptibly, in fact, so that more than a month had elapsed before Madame Bastien really began to feel uneasy, hence it did not seem at all probable that there could be any connection between the visit to the château and Frederick's melancholy.

Besides, how could Madame Bastien suppose that this youth reared by her – a youth who had always seemed of so noble and generous a character – could know envy?

So, reassured by Doctor Dufour, Madame Bastien, though she watched the different phases of her son's condition, forced herself to conceal the sadness she often felt on seeing him so changed, and awaited his recovery with resignation.

At first Frederick had tried to find some diversion in study, but soon study became impossible; his mind was elsewhere. Then he said to himself:

"Whatever I may learn, whatever I may know, I shall never be anything but Frederick Bastien, a sort of half peasant, doomed to a life of obscurity, while that young marquis, without ever having done anything to deserve it, enjoys all the glory of a name which has been illustrious for ages."

Then, as all the feudal relics at Pont Brillant, those galleries of paintings, those family portraits, those gorgeous escutcheons, recurred to Frederick's mind, for the first time in his life the poor boy felt deeply humiliated by the obscurity of his birth, and overcome with discouragement, said to himself:

"This young marquis, already weary of the magnificence by which he is surrounded, indifferent to the treasures of which even a thousandth part would make my mother and me and a host of others so happy. Why, and by what right does he possess all this magnificence? Has he acquired these blessings by his toil? No. To enjoy all this, he has only taken the trouble to be born. Why should he have everything and others nothing?"

CHAPTER VI

THE first period of envy that Frederick experienced was of a passive, the second of an active character.

It is impossible to describe what he suffered then, especially as this feeling, concealed, concentrated as it were in the lowest depths of his soul, had no outlet, and was constantly stimulated by the sight of the castle, which seemed to meet his gaze at every turn, dominating as it did the whole country roundabout. The more Frederick realised the alarming progress of his malady, the more strenuously he endeavoured to hide it from his mother, telling himself in his gloom and despair that such weakness deserved scorn and contempt, and that not even a mother could condone it.

All mental maladies react upon the physical system. Frederick's health gradually gave way. He could not sleep, and he, who had formerly been so energetic and active, seemed to dread the slightest exertion. In fact, the pressing and tender solicitations of his mother could alone arouse him from his apathy or his gloomy reveries.

Poor Marie! How intensely she, too, suffered, but in silence, endeavouring to maintain a cheerful manner all the while for fear of alarming her son about himself, and waiting with mingled anxiety and hope the end of this crisis in her son's life.

But alas! how long and painful this waiting seemed. What a change! What a contrast between this gloomy, listless, taciturn life, and the bright, busy, happy existence she and her son had previously led!

One day early in October Madame Bastien and her son were together in the room that served both as parlour and study. Frederick, seated at the table, with his head supported on his left hand, was writing slowly and listlessly in a large exercise book.

Madame Bastien, seated only a little distance from him, was apparently occupied with some embroidery, but in reality she was holding her needle suspended in the air, ready to resume her work at her son's slightest movement, while she furtively watched him.

Tears she could hardly restrain filled her eyes as she noted the terrible change in her son's appearance, and remembered that only a comparatively short while ago the hours spent in study at this same table had been such pleasant, happy hours both for Frederick and herself, and compared the zeal and enthusiasm which her son had then displayed in his work with the listlessness and indifference she now remarked in him, for she soon saw his pen slip from his fingers, while his countenance displayed an intense ennui and lassitude.

At last the lad, only half smothering a heavy sigh, buried his face in his hands and remained in this attitude several moments. His mother did not lose sight of him for an instant, but what was her surprise on seeing her son suddenly lift his head, and with eyes flashing and a faint colour tinging his cheeks, while a sardonic smile curved his lips, suddenly seize his pen again, and begin writing with feverish rapidity.

The youth was transfigured. So inert, despondent, and lethargic a moment before, he now seemed full to overflowing of life and animation. One could see that his thoughts, too, flowed much more rapidly than his pen could trace them on the paper, by an occasional impatient movement of the body or the quick tapping of his foot upon the floor.

A few words of explanation are necessary here.

For some time Frederick had complained to his mother of his distaste, or rather his incapacity, for any regular work, though occasionally, in compliance with Madame Bastien's wishes as well as in the hope of diverting his mind, he had attempted something in the way either of study or an essay on some given subject, but almost invariably he had appealed to his formerly fertile imagination in vain.

"I can't imagine what is the matter with me," he would murmur, despondently. "My mind seems to be enveloped in a sort of haze. Forgive me, mother, it is not my fault."

And Madame Bastien found a thousand reasons to excuse and console him.

So on this occasion the young mother fully expected to see Frederick soon abandon his work. What was her astonishment, consequently, to see him for the first time write on and on with increasing interest and eagerness.

In this return to former habits Madame Bastien fancied she could detect the first sign of the end of this critical period in the life of her son. Doubtless his mind was beginning to emerge from the sort of haze which had so long obscured it, and, eager to satisfy herself of the fact, Madame Bastien rose, and noiselessly approaching her son on tiptoe, she placed her hands on his shoulders and leaned over to read what he had written.

In his surprise the youth gave a violent start, then, hastily closing his exercise book, turned an impatient, almost angry face, toward his mother and exclaimed:

"You had no right to do that, mother."

Then reopening his book, he tore out the pages he had just written, crumpled them up in his hands, and threw them into the fire that was blazing on the hearth, where they were soon burnt to ashes.

Madame Bastien, overwhelmed with astonishment, stood for a moment speechless and motionless; then, comparing this rudeness on the part of her son with the delightful camaraderie which had formerly existed between them, she burst into tears.

It was the first time her son had ever wounded her feelings. Seeing his mother's tears, Frederick, in an agony of remorse, threw his arms around his mother's neck and covered her face with tears and kisses, exclaiming in a voice broken by sobs:

"Oh, forgive me, mother, forgive me!"

On hearing this repentant cry, Madame Bastien reproached herself for her tears. She even reproached herself for the painful impression the incident had made upon her, for was it not due to Frederick's unfortunate condition? so, covering her son's face with passionate kisses, she, in her turn, implored his forgiveness.

"My poor child, you are not well," she exclaimed, tenderly, "and your suffering renders you nervous and irritable. I was very foolish to attach any importance to a slight show of impatience for which you were hardly accountable."

"No, oh, no, mother, I swear it."

"Nonsense! my child, I believe you. As if I could doubt you, my dear Frederick."

"I tore out the pages, mother," continued the lad with no little embarrassment, for he was telling a falsehood, "I tore out the pages because I was not satisfied with what I had written. It was the worst thing I have written since this – this sort of – of despondency seized me."

"And I, seeing you write with so much apparent animation for the first time in weeks, felt so pleased that I could not resist the temptation to see what you had written. But let us say no more about that, my dear Frederick, though I feel almost sure that you have been too severe a critic."

"No, mother, I assure you – "

"Oh, well, I will take your word for it, and now as you are not in the mood for work, suppose we go out for a little walk."

"It is so cloudy, mother, besides, I don't feel as if I had energy enough to take a single step."

"It is this dangerous languor that I am so anxious to have you fight against and overcome if possible. Come, my dear lazybones, come out and row me about the lake in your boat. The exercise will do you good."

"I don't feel equal to it, really, mother."

"Well, you haven't heard, I think, that André said he saw a big flock of plover this morning. Take your gun, and we will go over to Sablonnière heath. You will enjoy it and so shall I. You are such a good shot, it is a pleasure to see you handle a gun."

"I don't take any pleasure in hunting now."

"Yet you used to be so fond of it."

"I don't care for anything now," replied Frederick, almost involuntarily, in a tone of intense bitterness.

Again the young mother felt the tears spring to her eyes, and Frederick, seeing his mother's distress, exclaimed:

"I love you always, mother, you know that."

"Oh, yes, I know that, but you have no idea how despondently you said, 'I don't care for anything now.'"

Then trying to smile in order to cheer her son, Marie added:

"Really, I can't imagine what is the matter with me to-day. I seem to be continually saying and doing the wrong thing, and here you are crying again, my dear child."

"Never mind, mother, never mind. It is a long time since I have cried, and I really believe it will do me good."

He spoke the truth. These tears did indeed seem to relieve his overburdened heart, and when he at last looked up in the face of the mother who was tenderly bending over him, and saw her beautiful features wearing such an expression of infinite tenderness, he thought for an instant of confessing the feelings that tortured him.

"Yes, yes," he said to himself, "I was wrong to fear either scorn or anger from her. In her angelic goodness of heart I shall find only pity, compassion, consolation, and aid."

The mere thought of confessing all to his mother comforted him, and seemed even to restore a little of his former courage, for after a moment he said to Madame Bastien:

"You proposed a walk a few minutes ago, mother. I believe you are right in thinking that the open air would do me good."

This admission on her son's part seemed to Madame Bastien a good omen, and hastily donning her hat and a silk mantle, she left the house in company with her son.

But now the time for the confession had come, the youth shrank from it. He could think of no way to broach the subject, or to excuse himself to his mother for having concealed the truth from her so long.

As they were walking along, the sky, which had been so lowering all the morning, suddenly cleared, and the sun shone out brightly.

"What a delightful change!" exclaimed Madame Bastien, in the hope of cheering her son. "One might almost think that the radiant sun had emerged from the clouds to give you a friendly greeting. And how pretty that old juniper looks in this flood of sunlight. That old juniper over there at the end of the field, you remember it, of course?"

Frederick shook his head.

"What! you have forgotten those two long summer days when I sat in the shade of that old tree while you finished that poor labourer's work?"

"Oh, yes, that is true," replied Frederick, quickly.

The recollection of that generous act seemed to make the thought of the painful confession he must make to his mother less painful, and his growing cheerfulness showed itself so plainly in his face that Madame Bastien said to him:

"I was right to insist upon your coming out, my child. You look so much brighter that I am sure you must be feeling better."

"I am, mother."

"How glad I am, my son," exclaimed Madame Bastien, clasping her hands, thankfully. "What if this should be the end of your malady, Frederick!"

As the young mother made this gesture of thankfulness, the light silk mantle she was wearing slipped from her shoulders unnoticed either by her or by Frederick, who replied:

"I don't know why it is, but I too hope like you, mother, that I shall soon be myself again."

"Ah, if you too hope so, we are saved," exclaimed his mother, joyfully. "M. Dufour told me that this strange and distressing malady which has been troubling you often disappears as suddenly as it came, like a bad dream, and health returns as if by enchantment."

"A dream!" exclaimed Frederick, looking at his mother with a strange expression on his face; "yes, mother, you are right. It was a bad dream."

"What is the matter, my child? You seem greatly excited, but it is with pleasurable emotion. I know that by your face."

"Yes, mother, yes! If you knew – "

But Frederick did not have time to finish the sentence. A sound that was coming nearer and nearer, but that Marie and her son had not noticed before, made them both turn.

A few yards behind them was a man on horseback, holding Madame Bastien's mantle in his hand.

Checking his horse, which a servant who was in attendance upon him hastened forward to hold, the rider sprang lightly to the ground, and with his hat in one hand and the mantle in the other he advanced toward Madame Bastien, and bowing low, said, with perfect grace and courtesy of manner:

"I saw this mantle slip from your shoulders, madame, and deem myself fortunate in being able to return it to you."

Then with another low bow, having the good taste to thus evade Madame Bastien's thanks, the rider returned to his horse and vaulted into the saddle. As he passed Madame Bastien he deviated considerably from his course, keeping near a hedge that bordered the field, as if fearing the close proximity of his horse might alarm the lady, then bowed again, and continued on his way at a brisk trot.

This young man, who was about Frederick's age, and who had a remarkably handsome face and distinguished bearing, had evinced so much grace of manner and politeness, that Madame Bastien innocently remarked to her son:

"It is impossible to conceive of any one more polite or better bred, is it not, Frederick?"

Just as Madame Bastien asked her son this question, a small groom in livery, who was following the horse-man, and who, like his master, was mounted upon a superb blooded horse, passed, the lad, who was evidently a strict observer of etiquette, having waited until his master was the prescribed twenty-five yards in advance of him before he moved from his place.

Madame Bastien motioned him to stop. He did so.

"Will you be kind enough to tell me your master's name?" asked the young woman.

"M. le Marquis de Pont Brillant, madame," replied the groom, with a strong English accent.

Then seeing that his master had started on a brisk trot, the lad did the same.

"Did your hear that, Frederick?" asked Marie, turning to her son. "That was the young Marquis de Pont Brillant. Is he not charming? It is pleasant to see such a worthy representative of rank and fortune, is it not, my son? To be such a high and mighty personage, and so perfectly polite and well-bred, is certainly a charming combination. But why do you not answer me, Frederick? What is the matter, Frederick?" added Madame Bastien, suddenly becoming uneasy.

"There is nothing the matter with me, mother," was the cold reply.

"But there must be. Your face looks so different from what it did a moment ago. You must be suffering, and, great Heavens, how pale you are!"

"The sun has disappeared behind the clouds again, and I am cold!"

"Then let us hasten back, – let us hasten back at once! Heaven grant the improvement you spoke of just now may continue."

"I doubt it very much, mother."

"How despondently you speak."

"I speak as I feel."

"You are not feeling as well, then, my dear child?"

"Not nearly as well," the lad replied. Then added, with a sort of ferocious bitterness, "I have suffered a relapse, a complete relapse, but it is the cold that has caused it, probably."

And the unfortunate youth, who had always adored his mother, now experienced an almost savage delight in increasing his youthful parent's anxiety, thus avenging the poignant suffering which his mother's praises of Raoul de Pont Brillant had caused him.

Yes, for jealousy, a feeling as entirely unknown to Frederick as envy had been heretofore, now increased the resentment he already felt against the young marquis.

The mother and son wended their way homeward, Madame Bastien in inexpressible grief and disappointment, Frederick in gloomy silence, thinking with sullen rage that he had been on the point of confessing to his mother the shameful secret for which he blushed, and that at almost the very same moment that she was lavishing enthusiasm upon the object of his envy, the Marquis de Pont Brillant.

The unconscious comparison which his mother had made between the young marquis and himself, a comparison, alas! so unflattering to himself, changed the almost passive dislike he had heretofore felt for Raoul de Pont Brillant into an intense and implacable hatred.

CHAPTER VII

THE little town of Pont Brillant is situated a few leagues from Blois, and not far from the Loire.

A promenade called the mall, shaded by lofty trees, bounds Pont Brillant on the south. A few houses stand on the left side of the boulevard, which also serves as a fair ground.

Doctor Dufour lived in one of these houses.

About a month had elapsed since the events we have just related.

Early in the month of November, on St. Hubert's Day, – St. Hubert, the reader may or may not recollect, is the hunter's patron saint, – the idlers of the little town had assembled on the mall about four o'clock in the afternoon to await the return of the young Marquis de Pont Brillant's hunting party from the neighbouring forest.

The aforesaid idlers were beginning to become impatient at the long delay, when a clumsy cabriolet, drawn by an old work-horse in a dilapidated harness, tied up here and there with strings, drove up to the doctor's door, and Frederick Bastien, stepping out of this extremely modest equipage, assisted his mother to alight.

The old horse, whose discretion and docility were established beyond all question, was left standing, with the lines upon his neck, close to the pavement in front of the doctor's house, which Madame Bastien and her son immediately entered.

An old servant woman ushered them into the parlour, which was on the second floor, with windows overlooking the mall.

"Can the doctor see me?" inquired Madame Bastien.

"I think so, though he is with one of his friends who has been here for a few days but who leaves for Nantes this evening. I will go and tell him that you are here, though, madame."

Envy, aided by jealousy, – the reader probably has not forgotten the praises so innocently lavished upon the young marquis by Madame Bastien, – had made frightful ravages in Frederick's heart during the past month, and the deterioration in his physical condition having been correspondingly great, one would scarcely have known him. His complexion was not only pale, but jaundiced and bilious, while his hollow cheeks, sunken eyes, which burned with a feverish light, and the bitter smile which was ever upon his lips, imparted an almost ferocious as well as unnatural expression to his face. His abrupt, nervous movements, and his curt, often impatient, voice, also made the contrast between the youth's past and present condition all the more striking.

Marie Bastien seemed utterly disheartened and discouraged, but the gentle melancholy of her face only made her remarkable beauty still more touching in its character.

A cold reserve on Frederick's part had succeeded the demonstrative affection that had formerly existed between mother and son. Marie, in despair, had nearly worn herself out in her efforts to discover the cause of this change in her child, and she was now beginning to fear that M. Dufour had been mistaken in his diagnosis of her son's case. She had accordingly come to consult him again on the subject, not having seen him for some time, as the worthy doctor had been detained at home by the duties and pleasures of a friendly hospitality.

After having gazed sadly at her son for a moment, Marie said to him, almost timidly, as if afraid of irritating him:

"Frederick, as you have accompanied me to the house of our friend, Doctor Dufour, whom I wish to consult in regard to myself, we had better take advantage of the opportunity to speak to him about you."

"It is not at all necessary, mother. I am not ill."

"Great Heavens! how can you say that? All last night you scarcely closed your eyes, my poor child. I went into your room several times to see if you were asleep and always found you wide awake."

"It is so almost every night."

"Alas! I know it, and that is one of the things that worry me so."

"You do very wrong to trouble yourself about it, mother. I shall get over it by and by."

"But consult M. Dufour, I beg of you. Is he not the best friend we have in the world? Tell him your feeling, and listen to his counsels."

"I tell you again there is no need for me to consult M. Dufour," replied the lad, impatiently. "I warn you, too, that I shall not answer one of his questions."

"But, my son, listen to me!"

"Good Heavens! mother, what pleasure do you find in tormenting me like this?" Frederick exclaimed, stamping his foot angrily. "I have nothing to tell M. Dufour, and I shall tell him nothing. You will find out whether I have any will of my own or not."

Just then the doctor's servant came in and said to Madame Bastien that the doctor was waiting for her in his office.

Casting an imploring look at her son, the young mother furtively wiped away her tears and followed the servant to the doctor's office. Frederick, thus left alone in the room, leaned his elbow upon the sill of the open window, which overlooked the mall as we have said before. Between the mall and the Loire stretched a low range of hills, while in the horizon and dominating the forest that surrounded it was the Château de Pont Brillant, half veiled in the autumnal haze.

Frederick's eyes, after wandering aimlessly here and there for a moment, finally fixed themselves upon the château. On beholding it, the unfortunate lad started violently, his features contracted, then became even more gloomy, and with his elbows still resting on the window-sill he lapsed into a gloomy reverie.

So great was his preoccupation that he did not see or hear another person enter the room, a stranger, who, with a book in his hand, seated himself in a corner of the room without taking any notice of the youth.

Henri David, for that was the name of the newcomer, was a tall, slender man about thirty-five years of age. His strong features, embrowned by long exposure to the heat of the tropical sun, had a peculiar charm, due, perhaps, to an expression of habitual melancholy. His broad, rather high forehead, framed with wavy brown hair, seemed to indicate reflective habits, and his bright, dark eyes, surmounted by fine arched eyebrows, had a penetrating, though thoughtful expression.

This gentleman, who had just returned from a long journey, had been spending several days at the house of Doctor Dufour, his most intimate friend, but was to leave that same evening for Nantes to make preparation for another and even more extended journey.

Frederick, still leaning on the window-sill, never once took his eyes off the castle; and after a few moments Henri David, having laid his book on his knee, doubtless to reflect upon what he had just been reading, raised his head and for the first time really noticed the lad whose side-face was distinctly visible from where he sat. He gave a sudden start, and it was evident that the sight of the youth evoked some sad and at the same time precious memory in his heart, for two tears glittered in the eyes that were fixed upon Frederick; then, passing his hand across his brow as if to drive away these painful recollections, he began to watch the boy with profound interest as he noted, not without surprise, the gloomy, almost heart-broken expression of his face.

The youth's eyes remained so persistently fixed upon the château that David said to himself:

"What bitter thoughts does the sight of the Château de Pont Brillant evoke in the mind of this pale, handsome youth that he cannot take his eyes off it?"

David's attention was suddenly diverted by the blare of trumpets still a long way off but evidently approaching the mall, and a few minutes afterward this promenade was thronged with a crowd, eager to see the cortège of hunters organised in honour of St. Hubert by the young marquis.

The expectations of the crowd were not disappointed. The shrill notes of the trumpets sounded louder and louder, and a brilliant cavalcade appeared at the end of the mall.

The procession began with four whippers-in on horseback, in buckskin jackets and breeches, with scarlet collars and facings richly trimmed with silver braid, with cocked hats on their heads and hunting knives in their belts. They also carried bugles, upon which they alternately sounded the calls for the advance and retreat of the hounds.

Then came fully one hundred magnificent hunting dogs of English breed, wearing upon their collars, still in honour of St. Hubert, big knots of fawn-coloured and scarlet ribbon.

Six keepers on foot, also in livery, with knee-breeches, silk stockings, and shoes with big silver buckles, also with hunting knives, followed the pack, responding with their horns to the bugles of the huntsmen.

A hunting fourgon, drawn by two horses driven tandem, served as a funeral-car for a magnificent stag reposing upon a bed of green branches, with his enormous antlers adorned with long floating ribbons.

Behind this fourgon came the huntsmen, all on horseback, some in long scarlet redingotes, others clad out of courtesy in uniform like that worn by the young Marquis de Pont Brillant.

Two barouches, each drawn by four magnificent horses driven by postilions in fawn-coloured satin jackets, followed the hunters. In one of these carriages was the dowager marquise as well as two young and beautiful women in riding-habits, with a rosette of the Pont Brillant colours on the left shoulder, for they had followed the chase from start to finish.

The other barouche, as well as a mail phaeton and an elegant *char-à-banc*, was filled with ladies and several elderly men, who by reason of age had merely played the part of onlookers.

A large number of superb hunters, intended to serve as relays in case of need, in richly emblazoned blankets and led by grooms on horseback, ended the cortège.

The perfect taste that characterised the whole display, the perfection of the dogs and horses, the richness of the liveries, the distinguished bearing of the gentlemen, and the beauty and elegance of the ladies that accompanied them would have excited admiration anywhere; but for the denizens of the little town of Pont Brillant this cortège was a superb spectacle, a sort of march from an opera, where neither music, gorgeous costumes, nor imposing display wore lacking; so in their artless admiration the most enthusiastic, or perhaps the most polite of these townspeople, – a goodly number of them were tradespeople, – shouted, "Bravo, bravo, monsieur le marquis!" and clapped their hands excitedly.

Unfortunately, the triumphal progress of the cortège was disturbed momentarily by an accident that occurred almost under the windows of M. Dufour's house.

The reader has not forgotten the venerable steed that had brought Madame Bastien to Pont Brillant and that had been left standing with the reins upon his neck in front of the doctor's house. The faithful animal had always proved worthy of the confidence reposed in him heretofore, and would doubtless have justified it to the end had it not been for this unwonted display.

At the first blast of the bugle, the old horse had contented himself with pricking up his ears, but when the procession began to pass him, the shrill notes of the hunting-horns, the baying of the hounds, the applause of the spectators, and the loud cries of the children, all combined to destroy the wonted composure of this aged son of toil, and neighing as loudly as in the palmy days of his youth, he evinced a most unfortunate desire to join the brilliant cortège that was crossing the mall.

With two or three vigorous bounds, the venerable animal, dragging the old chaise after him, landed in the midst of the gay cavalcade, where he distinguished himself by standing on his hind legs and pawing the air with his fore feet, abandoning himself to the ebullition of joy, directly in front of the barouche containing the dowager marquise, who drew back in terror, waving her handkerchief and uttering shrill cries of alarm.

Hearing this commotion, the young marquis glanced behind him to see what was the matter, then, wheeling his horse about, reached the side of his grandmother's carriage with a single bound, after which, with a few heavy blows of his riding-whip, he made the venerable but too vivacious

work-horse realise the impertinence of this familiarity, – a hard lesson which was greeted with shouts of laughter and loud applause of the spectators.

As for the poor old horse, regretting doubtless the breach of confidence of which he had been guilty, he humbly returned of his own accord to the doctor's door, while the hunting cortège proceeded on its way.

Frederick Bastien, from the window where he was standing, had witnessed the entire scene.

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN the cortège entered the mall, Frederick's countenance and expression underwent such a strange transformation that David, who had started toward the window on hearing the notes of the bugle, suddenly paused, forgetting everything else in his surprise, for the lad's face, in spite of its beauty, had become almost frightful in its expression. The bitter smile which had curved Frederick's lips while he was gazing at the distant château was succeeded by an expression of disdain when the cortège appeared, but when Raoul de Pont Brillant, clad in his costly hunting-suit and mounted on a magnificent jet black steed, passed amid the admiring plaudits of the crowd, Frederick's face became livid, and he clutched the window so violently that the veins, blue in his hands, stood out like whipcords under the white skin.

None of these details had escaped the notice of Henri David, who had had a wide experience with his kind, and his heart sank within him as he said to himself:

"Poor boy! to feel the pangs of hatred so early, for I cannot doubt that it is hatred he feels for that other lad on the handsome black horse! But what can be the cause of it?"

Henri David was asking himself this question when the little contretemps in which the old work-horse had played such a prominent part occurred.

On seeing his horse beaten, Frederick's face became terrible. His eyes dilated with anger, and, with a cry of rage, he would in his blind fury have precipitated himself from the window to run after the marquis, if he had not been prevented by David, who seized him about the waist.

The surprise this occasioned recalled Frederick to himself, but, recovering a little from his astonishment, he demanded, in a voice trembling with anger:

"Who are you, monsieur, and why do you touch me?"

"You were leaning so far out of the window, my boy, that I feared you would fall," replied David, gently. "I wanted to prevent such a calamity."

"Who told you it would be a calamity?" retorted the youth.

Then turning abruptly away, he threw himself in an armchair, buried his face in his hands, and began to weep.

David's interest and curiosity were becoming more and more excited as he gazed with tender compassion at this unfortunate youth who seemed now as utterly crushed as he had been violently excited a short time before.

Suddenly the door opened, and Madame Bastien appeared, accompanied by the doctor.

"Where is my son?" asked Marie, glancing around the room, without even seeing David.

Madame Bastien could not see her son, the armchair in which he had thrown himself being concealed by the door that had been thrown open.

On seeing this beautiful young woman, who looked scarcely twenty, as we have said before, and whose features bore such a striking resemblance to Frederick's, David remained for a moment speechless with surprise and admiration, to which was added a profound interest when he learned that this was the mother of the youth for whom he already felt such a sincere compassion.

"Where is my son?" repeated Madame Bastien, advancing farther into the room and gazing around her with evident anxiety.

"The poor child is there," said David, in a low tone, at the same time motioning the anxious parent to look behind the door.

There was so much sympathy and kindness in David's face as well as in the tone in which he uttered the words, that though Marie had been astonished at first at the sight of the stranger, she said to him now as if she had known him always:

"Good Heavens! what is the matter? Has anything happened to him?"

"Ah, mother," suddenly replied the youth, who had taken advantage of the moment during which he had been hidden from Madame Bastien's sight to wipe away his tears. Then bowing with a distrait air to Doctor Dufour, whom he had always treated with such affectionate cordiality before, Frederick approached his mother and said:

"Come, mother, let us go."

"Frederick," exclaimed Marie, seizing her son's hands and anxiously scrutinising his features, "Frederick, you have been weeping."

"No," he responded, stamping his foot impatiently, and roughly disengaging his hands from his mother's grasp. "Come, let us go, I say."

"But he has been weeping, has he not, monsieur?" again turning to David with a half-questioning, half-frightened air.

"Well, yes, I have been weeping," replied Frederick, with a sarcastic smile, "weeping for gratitude, for this gentleman here," pointing to David, "prevented me from falling out of the window. Now, mother, you know all. Come, let us go."

And Frederick turned abruptly toward the door.

Doctor Dufour, no less surprised and grieved than Madame Bastien, turned to David.

"My friend, what does this mean?" he asked.

"Monsieur," added Marie, also turning to the doctor's friend, embarrassed and distressed at the poor opinion this stranger must have formed of Frederick, "I have no idea what my son means. I do not know what has happened, but I must beg you, monsieur, to excuse him."

"It is I who should ask to be excused, madame," replied David, with a kindly smile. "Seeing your son leaning imprudently far out of the window just now, I made the mistake of treating him like a schoolboy. He is proud of his sixteen summers, as he should be, for at that age," continued David, with gentle gravity, "one is almost a man, and must fully understand and appreciate all the charm and happiness of a mother's love."

"Monsieur!" exclaimed Frederick, impetuously, his nostrils quivering with anger, and a deep flush suffusing his pale face, "I need no lesson from you."

And turning on his heel, he left the room.

"Frederick!" cried Marie, reproachfully, but her son was gone; so turning her lovely face, down which tears were now streaming, to David, she said, with touching artlessness:

"Ah, monsieur, I must again ask your pardon. Your kind words lead me to hope that you will understand my regret, and that you will not blame my unhappy son too severely."

"He is evidently suffering, and should be pitied and soothed," replied David, sympathisingly. "When I first saw him I was startled by his pallor and the drawn appearance of his features. But he has gone, madame, and I would advise you not to leave him by himself."

"Come, madame, come at once," said Doctor Dufour, offering his arm to Madame Bastien, and the latter, divided between the surprise the stranger's kindness excited and the intense anxiety she felt in regard to her son, left the room precipitately in company with the doctor to overtake Frederick.

On being left alone, David walked to the window. A moment afterward, he saw Madame Bastien come out of the house with her handkerchief to her eyes and leaning on the doctor, and step into the shabby little vehicle in which Frederick had already seated himself amid the laughs and sneers of the crowd that lingered on the mall, and that had witnessed the old work-horse's misadventure.

"That old nag won't forget the lesson the young marquis gave him for some time, I'll be bound," remarked one lounger.

"Wasn't he a sight when he planted himself with that old rattletrap of a chaise right in the midst of our young marquis's fine carriages?" remarked another.

"Yes, the old plug won't forget St. Hubert's Day in a hurry, I guess," added a third.

"Nor shall I forget it," muttered Frederick, trembling with rage.

At that moment the doctor assisted Madame Bastien into the vehicle, and Frederick, exasperated by the coarse jests he had just overheard, struck the innocent cause of all this commotion a furious blow, and the poor old horse, unused to such treatment, started off almost on a run.

In vain Madame Bastien implored her son to moderate the animal's pace. Several persons narrowly escaped being run over. A child who was slow in getting out of the way received a cut of the whip from Frederick, and whirling rapidly around the corner at the end of the mall, the chaise disappeared from sight amid the jeers and execrations of the angry crowd.

CHAPTER IX

AFTER he had escorted Marie to her carriage Doctor Dufour reëntered the house and found his friend still standing thoughtfully by the window.

On hearing the door open and close, David awoke from his reverie and turned toward the doctor, who, thinking of the painful scene which they had just witnessed, exclaimed, referring of course to Madame Bastien:

"Poor woman! poor woman!"

"The young woman does indeed seem greatly to be pitied," remarked David.

"Far more than you think, for she lives only for her son; so you can judge how she must suffer."

"Her son? Why, I thought he was her brother. She doesn't look a day over twenty. She must have married very young."

"At the age of fifteen."

"And how beautiful she is!" remarked Henri, after a moment's silence. "Her loveliness, too, is of an unusual type, – the at once virginal and maternal beauty that gives Raphael's virgin mothers such a divine character."

"Virgin mothers! The words are peculiarly appropriate in this connection. I will tell you Madame Bastien's story. I feel sure that it will interest you."

"You are right, my friend. It will give me food for thought during my travels."

"M. Fierval," began the doctor, "was the only son of a well-to-do banker of Angers; but several unfortunate speculations involved him deeply, financially. Among his business friends was a real estate agent named Jacques Bastien, who was a native of this town and the son of a notary. When M. Fierval became embarrassed, Bastien, who had considerable ready money, gave him valuable pecuniary assistance. Marie was fifteen at the time, beautiful, and, like nearly all the daughters of thrifty provincials, brought up like a sort of upper servant in the house."

"What you say amazes me. Madame Bastien's manners are so refined. She has such an air of distinction – "

"In short, you see nothing to indicate any lack of early education in her."

"Quite the contrary."

"You are right; but you would not be so much surprised if you had witnessed the numerous metamorphoses in Madame Bastien that I have. Though she was so young she made a sufficiently deep impression upon our real estate man for him to come to me one day, and say:

"'I want to do a very foolish thing, that is to marry a young girl, but what makes the thing a little less idiotic, perhaps, is that the girl I have in view, though extremely pretty, has very little education, though she is a capital housewife. She goes to market with her father's cook, makes delicious pickles and preserves, and hasn't her equal in mending and darning.' Six weeks afterward, Marie, in spite of her aversion, and in spite of her tears and entreaties, yielded to her father's inexorable will, and became Madame Bastien."

"Was Bastien himself aware of the repugnance he inspired?"

"Perfectly; and this repugnance, by the way, was only too well justified, for Bastien, who was then forty-two years old, was as ugly as I am, to say the least, but had the constitution of a bull, – a sort of Farnese Hercules he was, in short, – though much more inclined to embonpoint, as he is an immense eater, and not at all cleanly in his personal habits. So much for him physically. Mentally, he is coarse, ignorant, arrogant, and bigoted, insufferably proud of the money he has amassed. Strongly inclined to avarice, he thinks he is treating his wife very liberally by allowing her one servant, a gardener, who acts as a Jack-of-all-trades on the place, and an old work-horse to take her to town now and then. The only good thing about Bastien is that his business keeps him away about three-quarters of the time, for he buys large tracts of land all over the country, and, after dividing them

up, sells these subdivisions to small farmers. When he does return to his present home, a farm which proved a poor investment, and which he has been unable to dispose of, he devotes his time to making as much money out of it as he can, getting up at sunrise to watch his crops put in, and returning only at night to sup voraciously, drink like a fish, and fall into a drunken sleep."

"You are right, Pierre, this poor woman is much more unfortunate than I supposed. What a husband for such a charming creature! But men like this Bastien, who are endowed with the appetites of the brute combined with the instinct of rapacity, are at least excessively fond of their wives and their young. M. Bastien at least loves his wife and son, does he not?"

"As for his wife, your comparison of a virgin mother was singularly appropriate, as I remarked a few minutes ago. A day or two after his marriage, Bastien, who has always persecuted me with his confidences, said, sullenly: 'If I were to yield to that prudish wife of mine I should remain a bachelor husband all the rest of my life.' And it would seem that he has been obliged to, for, alluding to his son, he remarked one day, 'It is a good thing for me I had a child when I did, but for that I should never have had one.' In his anger at finding himself rebuffed, he tried to punish poor Marie for the repugnance he had inspired, but which he has been entirely unable to overcome, though he has resorted to brutality, to violence, and even to blows; for when this man is intoxicated he has not the slightest control over himself."

"Why, this is infamous!"

"Yes; and when I indignantly reproached him, he said: 'Nonsense. She is my wife, and the law is on my side. I didn't marry to remain a bachelor, and no slip of a girl like that is going to get the better of me.' And yet he has had to yield, for brute force cannot overcome a woman's aversion and loathing, particularly when the woman is endowed with remarkable strength of will like Marie Bastien. At first he intended to live in Blois, but his wife's resistance changed his plans. 'If this is the way she is going to act,' he said to me one day, 'she shall pay dearly for it. I have a farm near Pont Brillant. She shall live there alone on one hundred francs a month.' And he was as good as his word. Marie accepted the pinched and lonely life Bastien imposed upon her with courage and resignation, though Bastien did his best to make her existence as miserable as possible, until he learned that she was enceinte. After that he became a little more lenient, for though he still left Marie at the farm, he allowed her to make a few inexpensive changes, which, thanks to Madame Bastien's good taste, have quite transformed the abode. The amiability and many virtues of his charming wife seem to have wrought some slight improvement in Bastien, for though he is still coarse, he seems to be rather less of a brute, and to have decided to make the best of his life of a bachelor husband. 'Well, doctor, I was born lucky after all,' he remarked to me, not very long ago. 'My wife is living, and I am not sorry for it on the whole. She is sweet-tempered and patient and economical, and I never give her a penny except for household expenses, yet she seems perfectly contented. She never sets foot off the farm, and seems to think only of her son. On the other hand, if my wife should die I should not be inconsolable, for, as you must understand yourself, to be a married man and yet have to lead a bachelor life has its objections as well as being very expensive; so whether my wife lives or dies I have no cause to complain. That was what I meant when I told you just now that I was really born lucky, after all.'"

"And his son, does he seem to really care anything about him?" inquired Henri, more and more interested.

"Bastien is one of those fathers who consider that a parent should always be crabbed and angry and fault-finding, so, during his rare sojourns at the farm, where he evinces more interest in his cattle than in his son, he always finds a means of incensing his child against him. The natural result of all this is that Bastien has no place in the lives of his wife and son. And, speaking of Frederick's education, I must tell you another of those admirable metamorphoses that maternal love has effected in Madame Bastien."

"Pray do, Pierre," said Henri, earnestly. "You have no idea how much this interests me."

"Reared as I have described, and married at the age of fifteen," continued the doctor, "Marie Bastien had received a very imperfect education, though she was really endowed with an unusual amount of intellectual ability. But when she became a mother, realising the importance of the duties devolving upon her, Marie, inconsolable at her ignorance, resolved to acquire in four or five years all the knowledge necessary to enable her to undertake her child's education, which she was determined to entrust to no one else."

"And this resolve?" inquired David.

"Was faithfully carried out. When she first broached the subject to Bastien he scoffed at the idea, but when Marie told him that she was determined not to be separated from her son, and reminded him how expensive it would be to have teachers come out to the farm from Pont Brillant and later from Blois, Bastien concluded that his wife might be right, after all, and consented to the arrangement. Fortunately Marie found in a young Englishwoman a treasure of knowledge, intelligence, and kindheartedness. Miss Harriet, for that was her name, appreciating and admiring this rare example of maternal devotion, devoted herself body and soul to her mission, and, ably assisted by the natural talent and untiring industry of her pupil, in four years she had imparted to the young mother a thorough acquaintance with history, geography, and literature. Madame Bastien had also become a sufficiently good musician to teach her son music. She had also acquired a fair knowledge of the English language, a sufficient knowledge of drawing to be able to teach Frederick to draw from nature. He profited wonderfully well by these lessons, for few boys of his age are equally far advanced or so thoroughly grounded, and his mother certainly had good cause to feel proud of the effects both of her training and teaching, when she suddenly perceived a strange change in him."

The doctor was here interrupted by the entrance of the old servant, who, addressing her master, said:

"Monsieur, I came to warn you that the diligence for Nantes will pass at six o'clock, and they have come for M. David's baggage."

"Very well, they can take it, and will you ask them to be good enough to inform me when the diligence arrives?"

"Yes, M. David." Then, with an expression of artless regret, she added:

"Is it really true that you are going to leave us, M. David? Is it possible that you are going to let your friend go?" she added, turning to the doctor.

"Do you hear that?" asked M. Dufour, smiling sadly. "I am not the only person who regrets your departure, you see."

CHAPTER X

AFTER the servant's departure, Henri David, still under the painful impression which his friend's revelations on the subject of Marie Bastien had produced, remained silent for several minutes.

Doctor Dufour, too, was silent and thoughtful, for the servant's announcement had reminded him that he was soon to be separated from his dearest friend, perhaps for years.

Henri was the first to speak.

"You were right, Pierre, I shall take away with me a delightful recollection of this charming Madame Bastien. What you have just told me will often be a subject of pleasant thought to me, and – "

"I understand you, Henri, and you must forgive me for not having thought of it sooner," exclaimed the doctor, noting his friend's emotion, "the sight of this youth must remind you – "

"Yes, the sight of this youth does remind me of one I can never forget, my poor Fernand," said Henri, seeing the doctor hesitate. "He was about Frederick's age, so it is only natural that this handsome boy should excite my interest, an interest which is naturally increased by the admiration I feel for his brave and devoted mother. Heaven grant that, after all her love and devotion, her son is not going to be a disappointment to her. But how is it that, after he has been reared with such care and solicitude, he should now give his mother such grave cause for anxiety?"

"The fact is that this lad, whom you have just seen so pale and thin and sullen and irascible, was full of health and gaiety and good humour only a few months ago. Then the relations that existed between his mother and himself were of the most charming as well as affectionate character imaginable, while his generosity of heart could not have failed to excite your liveliest admiration."

"Poor boy," said Henri David, compassionately. "I believe you, Pierre, for there is such an expression of sadness and bitterness on his handsome face. It is evident that he is not bad at heart. It seems to me more as if he were suffering from some secret malady," added Henri, thoughtfully. "How strange it is that there should be such a remarkable change in him in so short a time!"

"I cannot understand it myself," replied the doctor, "for heart and mind and body all seem to have been attacked at the same time. A short time ago study was a pleasure to Frederick, his imagination was brilliant, his mental faculties almost precocious in their development. All this is changed now, and about a month ago his mother, distressed at the state of apathy into which her son had so suddenly relapsed, decided to employ a tutor for him, hoping that a change of instructors and new branches of study, more especially those of natural science, would act as a sort of stimulant."

"Well?"

"At the end of a week the tutor, disgusted with Frederick's dullness, rudeness, and violence, left the house."

"But to what do you attribute this remarkable change?"

"I thought and still think that it is due to natural or rather physical causes. There are many instances of similar crises in youths on attaining the age of puberty. It is a time of life when the salient traits of character begin to manifest themselves, when the man succeeding the youth begins to show what he is going to be some day. This metamorphosis nearly always causes serious disturbance throughout the entire system, and it is quite probable that Frederick is now under the influence of this phenomenon."

"Doesn't this very plausible explanation reassure Madame Bastien?"

"One can never entirely reassure a mother, at least a mother like that. The reasons I gave her calmed her fears for awhile, but the trouble increased and she took fright again. In her interview with me just now she made no attempt to disguise her fears, and even accused herself of being to blame for the recent state of things. 'I am his mother and yet I cannot divine what is the matter with him, so I certainly must be lacking in penetration and in maternal instinct. I am his mother, and yet he will not tell me the cause of the trouble that is killing him. It is my fault. It must be. I cannot have

been a good mother. A mother has always done something wrong if she cannot succeed in gaining her child's confidence.'"

"Poor woman!" exclaimed Henri. "She wrongs herself, though, in considering her maternal instinct in fault."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, doesn't her instinct warn her that you are wrong, plausible as your explanation of her son's condition is, for, in spite of her confidence in you, and in spite of the desire she feels to be reassured, your assurances have not calmed her fears."

Then, after sitting silent and thoughtful for a moment, Henri asked:

"Is that large building we see there in the distance the Château de Pont Brillant?"

"Yes. Its owner, the young marquis, was in the party that passed just now. But why do you ask?"

"Does Madame Bastien's son visit there?"

"Oh, no. The Pont Brillants are a very proud and aristocratic family, and associate only with the nobility."

"So Frederick does not even know the young marquis?"

"If he does, it is only by sight, for I repeat the young marquis is much too proud to have anything to do with a youth of Frederick's humble station."

"Is this family popular?" inquired Henri David, more and more thoughtfully.

"The Pont Brillants are immensely rich, nearly all the land for six or seven leagues around belongs to them. They own, too, most of the houses in this little town. The tradespeople, too, are of course largely dependent upon their patronage, so this powerful family command at least a strong show of respect and attachment. There is also a certain amount of money given to the poor every year by the family. The mayor and the curé distribute it, however. The young marquis has nothing more to do with that than his grandmother, whose skepticism and cynicism make Baron Holbach's atheism seem pale by comparison. But why do you ask all these questions in relation to the château and its occupants?"

"Because just now when I was alone with Frederick I thought I discovered that he hated this young marquis with a deadly hatred."

"Frederick?" exclaimed the doctor, with quite as much surprise as incredulity. "That is impossible. I am sure he never spoke to M. de Pont Brillant in his life. So how could he possibly feel any such animosity against the young marquis?"

"I do not know, but I am sure, from what I have seen, that he does."

"What you have seen?"

"The horse that brought Frederick and his mother here, not being hitched, evinced an intention of joining the brillant cortège as it passed. The young marquis struck it a heavy blow with his whip and drove it back, and if I had not restrained Frederick, he would have jumped out of the window and flown at M. de Pont Brillant."

"So it was in order not to frighten Madame Bastien you told us – "

"That Frederick had imprudently leaned too far out of the window. Yes, Pierre, I repeat it, I did not lose a gesture or the slightest change of expression in the poor boy's face. It is hatred, a deadly hatred, that he feels for the other youth."

"But I tell you that Madame Bastien's son has never even spoken to Raoul de Pont Brillant. They live in two entirely different worlds. They can never have come in the slightest contact with each other."

"True. Your reasoning seems perfectly just, and I suppose I ought to acquiesce," replied Henri David, thoughtfully. "Nevertheless, something tells me that I am right, and now I almost begin to regret having met this charming woman, for the very reason that she and her son have inspired me with such a deep interest."

"What do you mean?"

"Frankly, my friend, what can be more sad than to feel a commiseration as profound as it is futile? Who could be more worthy of sympathy and respect than this most unhappily married woman, who has lived even cheerfully for years in almost complete solitude, uncomplainingly, with a son as handsome, sensible, and intelligent as herself? And suddenly at one fell swoop this life is blighted; the mother watches with growing despair the progress of the mysterious malady the cause of which she has striven in vain to discover. Ah, I can understand only too well the agony of an experience like hers, for I too loved my poor Fernand almost to idolatry," continued Henri, scarcely able to restrain his tears, "and to me this utter powerlessness in the presence of an evil one deeply deplores has always been a source of torture, almost of remorse, to me."

"Yes, that is true," replied the doctor. "How often you said almost the very same thing in the letters you wrote me during your long and dangerous journeys, undertaken with such a noble object, but at the same time with the necessity of authenticating the most frightful facts, the most barbarous customs, the most atrocious laws, though realising all the while that this state of things must go on for years, and perhaps even for centuries, unhindered. Yes, yes, I can understand how it must try a soul like yours to see evils which it is impossible to assuage."

The clock in a neighbouring church struck three quarters past five.

"My dear friend, we have but a few minutes left," remarked Henri, holding out his hand to the doctor, who was unable to speak for awhile, so great was his emotion.

"Alas! my dear Henri," he said at last, "I ought to have accustomed myself to the idea of your departure, but you see my courage fails me after all."

"Nonsense, Pierre, I shall see you again in less than two years. This voyage will probably be the last I shall undertake, and then I am coming to take up my abode near you."

"Monsieur, monsieur, the Nantes diligence is coming in," cried the old servant, rushing into the room. "You haven't a minute to lose."

"Farewell, Pierre," said Henri, clasping his friend in a last embrace.

"Farewell. God grant we may meet again, my dear Henri."

A few minutes afterward, Henri David was on his way to Nantes, from which port he was to start on an expedition to Central Africa.

CHAPTER XI

ONE more drop makes the cup run over, says the proverb. In like manner, the scene that had occurred on the mall at Pont Brillant on St. Hubert's Day had caused the rancour that filled Frederick Bastien's heart to overflow.

In the chastisement which the young marquis had inflicted upon his horse, Frederick saw an insult, or rather a pretext, that would enable him to manifest his hatred toward Raoul de Pont Brillant.

After a night spent in gloomy reflections, Madame Bastien's son wrote the following note:

"If you are not a coward, you will come to Grand Sire's Rock to-morrow morning with your gun loaded. I shall have mine. Come alone, I shall be alone.

"I hate you. You shall know my name when I have told you to your face the reason of my hatred.

"Grand Sire's Rock stands in a lonely part of your forest. I shall be there all the morning, and all day if necessary, waiting for you: so you will have no excuse for failing to come."

This absurd effusion can be explained only by Frederick's youth and intense animosity, as well as his utter lack of experience and the isolation in which he had lived.

This effusion written and posted, the youth feigned unusual calmness all day, so no one would suspect his designs.

When night came, he told Madame Bastien that he felt very tired and intended to stay in bed all the next forenoon, and that he did not want any one to come to his room until after he got up; so the mother, hoping rest would prove beneficial to her son, promised his request should be complied with.

At daybreak Frederick cautiously made his escape through his bedroom window and hastened to the place of rendezvous. As he approached it his heart throbbed with ferocious ardour, feeling confident that Raoul de Pont Brillant would hasten to avenge the insult contained in this insulting note he had received.

"He shall kill me, or I will kill him," Frederick said to himself. "If he kills me, so much the better. What is the use of dragging out a life poisoned with envy? If I kill him – "

He shuddered at the thought, then, ashamed of his weakness, he continued:

"If I kill him, it will be better yet. He will cease to enjoy the pleasures and luxuries that arouse my envy. If I kill him," added the unfortunate youth, trying to justify this bloodthirsty resolve on his part, "his luxury will no longer flaunt itself before my poverty and the poverty of many others who are even more to be pitied than I am."

The name of Grand Sire's Rock had been bestowed centuries before on a pile of big granite boulders only a short distance from one of the least frequented paths in the forest, and, as a number of large chestnut and pine trees had sprung up between the moss-covered rocks, it was a wild and lonely spot, well suited for a hostile meeting.

Frederick deposited his gun in a sort of natural grotto formed by a deep opening half concealed by a thick curtain of ivy. This spot was only about forty yards from the road by which the marquis must come if he came at all, so Frederick stationed himself in a place where he could see quite a distance down the road without being seen.

One hour, two hours, three hours passed and Raoul de Pont Brillant did not come.

Unable to believe that the young marquis could have scorned his challenge, Frederick, in his feverish impatience, devised all sorts of excuses for his adversary's delay. He had not received the letter until that morning; he had doubtless been obliged to do some manœuvring to be able to go out alone; possibly he had preferred to wait until nearer evening.

Once Frederick, thinking of his mother and of her despair, said to himself that perhaps in less than an hour he would have ceased to live.

This gloomy reflection rather weakened his resolution for a moment, but he soon said to himself:

"It will be better for me to die. My death will cost my mother fewer tears than my life, judging from those I have already compelled her to shed."

While he was thus awaiting the arrival of the marquis, a carriage that had left the château about three o'clock in the afternoon paused at the intersection of the footpath not far from the so-called Grand Sire's Rock.

When this low, roomy equipage drawn by two magnificent horses stopped at the cross-roads, two tall, powdered footmen descended from their perch, and one of them opened the carriage door, through which the Dowager-Marquise de Pont Brillant alighted quite nimbly in spite of her eighty-eight years; after which another woman, quite as old as the dowager, also stepped out.

The other footman, taking one of the folding-chairs which invalids or very old people often use during their walks, was preparing to follow the two octogenarians when the marquise said, in a clear though rather quavering voice:

"Remain with the carriage, which will wait for me here. Give the folding-chair to Zerbinette."

To answer to the coquettish, pert name of Zerbinette at the age of eighty-seven seems odd indeed, but when she entered the service of her foster-sister, the charming Marquise de Pont Brillant, seventy years before, as assistant hair-dresser, her retroussé nose, pert manner, big, roguish eyes, provoking smile, trim waist, small foot, and dimpled hand richly entitled her to the sobriquet bestowed upon her at that time by the marquise, who, married direct from the convent at the age of sixteen, was already considerably more than flirtatious, and who, struck by her assistant hair-dresser's boldness of spirit and unusual adaptability for intrigue, soon made Zerbinette her chief maid and confidante.

Heaven only knows the good times and larks of every sort this pair had enjoyed in their palmy days, and the devotion, presence of mind, and fertility of resource Zerbinette had displayed in assisting her mistress to deceive the three or four lovers she had had at one time.

The deceased husband of the marquise need be mentioned only incidentally in this connection; in the first place because one did not take the trouble to deceive a husband in those days, and in the second place because the high and mighty seigneur Hector-Magnifique-Raoul-Urbain-Anne-Cloud-Frumence, Lord Marquis of Pont Brillant and half a dozen other places, was too much of a man of his time to interfere with madame, his wife, in the least.

From this constant exchange of confidences on the part of the marquise and of services of every sort and kind on the part of Zerbinette there had resulted a decided intimacy between mistress and maid. They never left each other, they had grown old together, and their chief pleasure now consisted in talking over the escapades and love affairs of former years, and it must be admitted that each day had its saint in their calendar.

The dowager-marquise was small, thin, wrinkled, but very straight. She dressed in the most elaborate fashion and was always redolent with perfumes. She wore her hair crimped and powdered, and there was a bright red spot on each cheek that increased the brilliancy of her large black eyes, which were still bold and lustrous in spite of her advanced age. She carried a small gold-headed ivory cane, and a richly jewelled snuff-box from which she regaled herself from time to time.

Zerbinette, who was a little taller than her mistress, but equally thin, wore her white hair in curls, and was attired with simple elegance.

"Zerbinette," said the dowager, after turning to take another look at the footman who had opened the carriage door, "who is that tall, handsome fellow? I don't remember to have seen him before."

"I doubt if you have, madame. He was just sent down from Paris."

"He's a fine-shaped fellow. Did you notice what broad shoulders he has, Zerbinette? Handsome lackeys always remind me" – the marquise paused to take a pinch of snuff – "handsome lackeys always remind me of that little devil the Baroness de Montbrison."

"Madame la marquise has forgotten. It was the French Guards the baroness – "

"You are right, and the Duc de Biron, their colonel – You remember M. de Biron, don't you?"

"I should think I did. You had a pass-key to his little house on the Boulevard des Poissonniers, and for your first rendezvous you dressed in the costume of Diana, the huntress, exactly as in that handsome pastel portrait of yourself. And how beautiful, ravishingly beautiful, you looked in the costume, with your slim waist and white shoulders and gleaming eyes!"

"Yes, my girl, yes. I had all those, and I made a good use of what the Lord gave me. But to return to my story; you are right, Zerbinette, in regard to the little baroness, it was the French Guards she went so crazy about, so much so, in fact, that M. de Biron, their colonel, went to the king and complained that his regiment was being ruined. 'I can't have that,' replied the king, 'I want my French Guards for myself. Montbrison got money enough by his wife to buy a regiment for her if she wants it.'"

"Unfortunately, M. de Montbrison was not a sufficiently gallant gentleman to do that. And speaking of handsome lackeys, madame must be thinking of Président de Lunel's wife, for – "

"Lunel!" exclaimed the dowager, pausing and glancing around her. "Say, we are not far from Grand Sire's Rock, are we?"

"No, madame."

"I thought not. Do you remember that story of the osprey and poor Président de Lunel?"

"I only remember that monsieur le président was as jealous as all possessed of the Chevalier de Bretteville, and he had good cause to be. So it used to afford madame no end of amusement to invite them both to the castle at the same time."

"Yes, and that was what reminded me of that affair of the osprey."

"I really have no idea what you mean."

"Ah, Zerbinette, you are growing old."

"Alas, yes, madame!"

"Well, we might as well walk in one direction as another, so suppose we pay a visit to Grand Sire's Rock. The sight of the dear old rock will rejuvenate me. Let me see, Zerbinette," added the marquise, taking another pinch of snuff, "when was it that poor Lunel and the chevalier were – "

"In October, 1779," responded Zerbinette, promptly.

"Sixty-odd years ago. Come and let us go and take a look at the famous rock. It will make me feel young again."

"Very well, madame, but won't you find the walk too fatiguing?"

"I have the legs of fifteen this morning, girl, but if they should fail me, you have my chair, you know."

CHAPTER XII

AS the two octogenarians started slowly down the path leading to Grand Sire's Rock, Zerbinette remarked to her mistress:

"You were going to tell the story of the osprey, madame."

"Oh, yes. You recollect how jealous Président de Lunel was of the chevalier. Well, one day I said to him, 'Sigismond, wouldn't you like to help me play a fine joke upon the chevalier?' 'I should be delighted, marquise.' 'But to do it, Sigismond, you must know how to imitate the cry of the osprey perfectly.' You can imagine the look on the president's face when I told him that; but when I said to him, 'Learn it, Sigismond, and as soon as you know it we will have a good laugh at the poor chevalier's expense,' he promised he would begin that very evening, as there were plenty of them in the neighbourhood. When the president had learned to imitate the cry, I made an appointment to meet the chevalier here at dusk. I came a little in advance of the time, in company with the president, whom I ensconced in the sort of cave at Grand Sire's Rock. 'Now, Sigismond, listen carefully to what I am going to say to you,' I began. 'The chevalier will soon be here. You are to count one thousand, so as to give him time to press his suit. I, too, will count a thousand, but not until we get to nine hundred and ninety-eight will I show any signs of softening toward the chevalier. Then you must begin to utter your osprey cries.' 'Capital, marquise, capital!' 'Hush, you bad boy, and listen to me. I shall say to the chevalier, "Oh, that horrid bird! I am frightfully superstitious about the osprey. Run to the château and get a gun to kill the hateful thing, and afterward we will see." The chevalier will run to get the gun, and then, my dear Sigismond, I will join you in the cave.' 'Really, marquise, you are the most charming little devil imaginable!' 'Hide, hide quick! here comes the chevalier.' And poor Lunel withdrew into his hole and began to count one, two, three, four, etc., while I went to join the chevalier."

"I can see the dear president's face now, as he carefully counted one, two, three, four, while the chevalier was with you," exclaimed Zerbinette, laughing like mad.

"All I can tell you, girl, is that though I had promised poor Lunel not to soften toward the chevalier until we had got to nine hundred and ninety-eight, I really didn't count more than ten. After awhile, the president, who had finished his thousand, began to play the osprey with all his might, and his strange, shrill, wild cries seemed to disturb the chevalier so much that I said:

"'It is the osprey. Run to the château and get a gun to kill the horrid thing. I hate the abominable creature so I long to tear it in pieces with my own hands. Run and get the gun. I will wait for you here.' 'What a strange whim, marquise. It is getting very dark, and you will be afraid here in the forest alone.' 'Nonsense, chevalier, I am no coward. Run to the château and come back as soon as you can.' It was quite time, my girl, for when I went to the poor president, his voice had begun to fail him, but fortunately he was all right again in a minute."

"And when the chevalier returned, madame?"

"He found the president and me not far from the place where we are now. 'You have come at last, chevalier,' I called out to him at a distance; 'but for the president, whom I met by chance, I should have died of fear.' 'I told you so, marquise,' he replied. 'And the osprey, I think I must have frightened him off, for I haven't heard him since I met the marquise,' replied the president. 'But, by the way, my dear chevalier,' added poor Lunel, innocently, 'do you know that the cry of the osprey always indicates some calamity?' and as he spoke the president slyly squeezed my left arm. 'Yes, my dear president, I have always heard that the cry is prophetic of evil,' responded the chevalier, squeezing my right arm. Afterward, when I went crazy over that actor, Clairville, he and I had many a good laugh over this little affair with the president and the chevalier, so for a long time 'It is the osprey' was a sort of proverb among the people of our set."

"Alas! those were fine times, madame."

"Oh, hush up, Zerbinette, with your alases! Those good times will come again."

"But when, madame?"

"Why, in the next world, of course. That was what I used to nearly wear myself out telling Abbé Robertin, who used to go nearly crazy over those delicious white truffles my cousin Doria used to send me. 'Well, madame la marquise, it is surely better to believe in that sort of an immortality than in nothing at all,' he used to reply, while he went on cramming himself. In other words, my girl, I expect to get my girlhood again, and all that goes with it, when I reach paradise."

"God grant it, madame," responded Zerbinette, devoutly. "Sixteen is certainly a delightful age."

"That is exactly what I said to myself yesterday while I was watching my grandson. What ardour and enthusiasm he displayed during the hunt! He's a handsome – But look, here is Grand Sire's Rock. It was in that little cave that the poor president played the part of an osprey."

"Don't go any closer to it, for Heaven's sake, madame. There may be some wild beast in it."

"I thought of going in to rest awhile."

"Don't think of such a thing, madame. It must be as damp as a cellar in there."

"That's a fact, so set my chair under this oak-tree, there on the sunny side. That is right. Where will you find a seat, Zerbinette?"

"Over there on that rock. It is a little closer to the cave than I like, but never mind."

"We were speaking of my grandson just now. He is a handsome fellow, there is no doubt about it."

"There is a certain viscountess who seems to be of the same opinion. It is always M. Raoul this, or M. Raoul that, and I have seen – "

"You have seen, you have seen – Why, you see nothing at all, girl. The viscountess takes a little notice of the boy merely to blind her idiot of a husband, so he won't get mad and make a fuss when M. de Monbreuil, the viscountess's lover arrives, for I have invited him to come in a few days. There is nothing that makes a house as lively and interesting as to have a lot of lovers about, so I invite all I know; but it is strange you haven't seen through the lady's manœuvre. I warned my grandson, for I feared the innocent, unsophisticated fellow might come to grief, the viscountess is so charming."

"Innocent, unsophisticated!" exclaimed Zerbinette, shaking her head. "You're mistaken about that, madame, for his infatuation for the mistress doesn't keep him from playing the deuce with her maid."

"Dear boy! Is that really true, Zerbinette? Is there anything worth looking at among the women the viscountess brought with her?"

"There is one tall blonde with dark eyes, plump as a partridge, with a complexion like milk, and the loveliest figure – "

"And you think that Raoul – "

"You know, madame, that at his age – "

"*Pardi!*" exclaimed the marquise, taking another pinch of snuff. "That reminds me," she continued, after a moment's reflection, "you know all about everybody in the neighbourhood, who is it that leads the life of a hermitess in that lonely farmhouse on the Pont Brillant road? You know the place; the house is covered with vines, and there is a porch of rustic work very much like that house my grandson has just been building for his fawns."

"Oh, yes, I know, madame. It is Madame Bastien who lives there."

"And who is Madame Bastien?"

"Did you hear that, madame?" asked Zerbinette, breathlessly.

"What?"

"Why, there in the cave. I heard something moving in there."

"Nonsense, Zerbinette, how silly you are! It is the wind rustling the ivy leaves."

"Do you really think so, madame?"

"There isn't the slightest doubt of it. But, tell me, who is this Madame Bastien?"

"She is the wife of a real estate agent. I suppose you would call him that, for he travels about the country buying tracts of land which he afterward subdivides and sells. He is scarcely ever at home."

"Ah, he is scarcely ever at home, that would be a great advantage, eh, Zerbinette. But tell me, is it true that this little Bastien is as pretty as people say?"

"She's a beauty, there's no doubt about it, madame. You remember Madame la Maréchale de Rubempré, don't you?"

"Yes, and this young woman?"

"Is as beautiful as she was, perhaps even more so."

"And her figure?"

"Is perfect."

"That is what Raoul told me after he met her in the fields the other day. But who is that big sallow boy who was with her? Some scallawag of a brother probably. It might be a good idea to get him out of the way by giving him a position as clerk in the steward's office with a salary of twelve or fifteen hundred francs a year."

"Good heavens, madame!" exclaimed Zerbinette, springing up in alarm, "there's somebody in the cave. Didn't you hear that noise?"

"Yes, I heard it," replied the intrepid dowager, "what of it?"

"Oh, madame, let us get away as quick as we can."

"I sha'n't do anything of the kind."

"But that noise, madame."

"He, he!" laughed the countess. "Perhaps it is the soul of the poor president come back to count one, two, three, four, etc. Sit down, and don't interrupt me again."

"You have always had the courage of a dragon, madame."

"There's no cause for alarm, you goose. Some osprey or some wild animal may have sought shelter there. I want to know who that big hulking boy was that Raoul saw with that Bastien woman, – her brother, eh?"

"No, madame, her son."

"Her son; why, in that case – "

"She was married when she was very young, and she is so admirably preserved that she doesn't look a day over twenty."

"That must be so, for Raoul took a desperate fancy to her. 'She has big, dark blue eyes, grandmother,' he said to me, 'a waist one can span with his two hands, and features as regular as those on an antique cameo. Only these plebeians are so little versed in the customs of good society that this one opened her big eyes in astonishment, merely because I was polite enough to take her a mantle she had dropped.' 'If she is as pretty as you say, you young simpleton, you ought to have kept the mantle, and taken it to her house. That would have gained you an entrance there.' 'But, grandmother,' replied the dear boy, very sensibly, 'it was by returning the mantle I found out that she was so pretty.'"

"Oh, well, M. Raoul could easily have gone to her house a few days afterward. She would have been delighted to see him, even if it were only to make all the *bourgeoisie* in the country, wild with envy."

"That is exactly what I told the dear child, but he did not dare to venture."

"Give him a little time, and he'll get his courage up, never fear."

"I tell you, my girl," resumed the dowager, after quite a long silence, as she slowly and thoughtfully took another pinch of snuff, "I tell you that the more I think of it, the more convinced I am that for many reasons this little Bastien would just suit the dear boy, that she would be a perfect godsend to him, in fact."

"I think so, too, madame."

"So we had better strike while the iron is hot," continued the dowager. "What time is it, Zerbinette?"

"Half-past four, madame," said the attendant, glancing at her watch.

"That gives us plenty of time. This morning when my grandson left to spend the day with the Merinvilles at Boncour, I promised him I would meet him at the lake at five o'clock, so we must make haste."

"But, madame, you forget that M. Raoul sent his groom to tell you that he was going to pay a call at Montel after leaving Boncour, and that he would not return to the château before seven."

"Yes, yes, you are right, girl. I must give up seeing him immediately then, for to return from Montel he will have to take the Vieille Coupe road, and that is too steep for me, for I'm a perfect coward in a carriage; besides, as it is only half-past four, I should have to drive too far to meet him, so I will postpone my conversation on the subject of the hermitess until this evening. Give me your arm, Zerbinette, and let us start, but first let me take another look at this famous rock."

"Don't go too near though, madame, for Heaven's sake."

But in spite of Zerbinette's protest she walked up to the rock, and, casting an almost melancholy glance at the wild spot, exclaimed:

"Ah, there is no change in the rocks. They look exactly as they did sixty years ago."

Then after a moment's silence, turning gaily to Zerbinette, who was holding herself prudently aloof, the dowager added:

"That story of the osprey has recalled hundreds of other pleasant reminiscences. I've a great mind to amuse myself by writing my memoirs some day. They might serve both to instruct and edify my grandson," the octogenarian continued, with a hearty laugh, in which Zerbinette joined.

For several minutes the sound of their laughter could be distinctly heard as the two slowly wended their way down the path.

When the sound had entirely died away, Frederick, his face livid, his expression frightful to behold, emerged from the cave where he had heard every word of the conversation between the dowager-marquise and Zerbinette, and, gun in hand, hastened toward another part of the forest.

CHAPTER XIII

THE Vieille Coupe road, which Raoul de Pont Brillant would be obliged to take on his return from the Château de Montel homeward, was a sort of deep hollow way, with high banks covered with tall pine-trees, whose heads formed such an impenetrable dome that the light was dim there even at noontime, and at sunset it was so dark that two men who met there would not be able to distinguish each other's features.

It was about six o'clock in the evening when Raoul de Pont Brillant turned in this path, which seemed all the darker and more gloomy from the fact that the highway he had just left was still lighted by the rays reflected from the setting sun. He was alone, having sent his groom to the château to inform the marquise of his change of plans.

He had proceeded only twenty yards when his vision became sufficiently accustomed to the obscurity to enable him to distinguish a human being standing motionless in the middle of the road, a short distance in front of him.

"Hallo there, get to one side of the road or the other," he shouted.

"One word, M. le Marquis de Pont Brillant," responded a voice.

"What do you want?" asked Raoul, checking his horse and leaning over upon his saddle, in a vain effort to distinguish the features of his interlocutor. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"M. de Pont Brillant, did you receive a note this morning requesting you to meet some one at Grand Sire's Rock?"

"No; for I left Pont Brillant at eight o'clock; but once more, what does all this mean? Who the devil are you?"

"I am the writer of the letter sent you this morning."

"Ah, well, my friend, you can – "

"I am not your friend," interrupted the voice, "I am your enemy."

"What's that you say?" exclaimed Raoul, in surprise.

"I say that I am your enemy."

"Indeed!" retorted Raoul, in a half-amused, half-contemptuous tone, for he was naturally very brave. "And what is your name, Mister Enemy?"

"My name is a matter of no consequence."

"Probably not, but why the devil do you stop me in the road at nightfall, then? Ah, I remember you said you wrote to me."

"Yes."

"To tell me what?"

"That you were a coward if you – "

"Wretch!" exclaimed Raoul, starting his horse.

But Madame Bastien's son struck the horse in the head with the barrel of his gun, forcing him to stop.

Raoul, a trifle startled at first, but really curious to know what the stranger was coming at, calmed himself, and remarked, coldly:

"You did me the honour to write to me, you say?"

"Yes, to tell you that if you were not a coward, you would come to Grand Sire's Rock to-day with your gun loaded like mine."

"And may I ask what we were to do with our guns?"

"We were to place ourselves ten paces apart, and then fire at each other."

"And for what object may I ask?"

"So I would kill you or you would kill me."

"That would probably have been the case at that distance unless we were very poor shots. But if one is so anxious to kill people, one should at least tell me why."

"I want to kill you – because I hate you."

"Bah!"

"Do not sneer, M. de Pont Brillant, do not sneer."

"It is very difficult not to, but I'll try simply to oblige you. You hate me, you say, and why?"

"The cause of my hatred concerns you as little as my name."

"Do you really think so?"

"I do."

"Well, you hate me, you say? What of it?"

"You must kill me or I shall kill you."

"That seems to be a settled thing with you. Where are we to fight?"

"Here, right here and now."

"But it isn't light enough to see."

"There is no need of its being light enough to see."

"But what are we to fight with?"

"With my gun."

"One gun?"

"Yes."

"That's a strange idea. How are we to do it?"

"Get down off your horse."

"And after that?"

"Pick up a handful of stones out of the road."

"Stones! So it is with stones that we are going to fight. It reminds me of the famous battle between David and Goliath."

"I said that you were to pick up a handful of stones out of the road. The darkness will prevent you from counting the stones, and you will hold them in your closed hand. The one who guesses the number correctly is to have the gun. He will place it against the other's breast and fire. You see that no daylight is needed for that, M. de Pont Brillant."

Frederick's manner was so resolute and his voice so incisive that the young marquis, strange as the whole affair seemed to be, decided that the speaker was really in earnest; then, suddenly remembering a conversation that had taken place in his grandmother's drawing-room, he burst into a hearty laugh and exclaimed:

"This is a good joke, upon my word. I understand everything now."

"Explain, M. de Pont Brillant."

"Last night at the château they were all telling stories about robbers and midnight attacks, and they laughed about what I would do under such circumstances. I talked a little boastfully of my courage, I suppose, so they concocted this little scheme to test it, for they knew that I would have to pass through this road in returning from Montel. You can tell the persons that paid you to waylay me that I behaved myself very creditably, for, upon my word as a gentleman, I took the thing seriously at first. Good night, my worthy friend. Let me pass now, for it is getting late, and I shall scarcely have time to reach Pont Brillant and dress before dinner."

"This is no joke, M. de Pont Brillant, nor is it a test. You will not be allowed to pass, and you are going to get down off your horse."

"I have had enough of this, I tell you," exclaimed Raoul, imperiously. "You have earned your money. Now stand aside so I can pass."

"Dismount, M. de Pont Brillant, dismount, I say!"

"So much the worse for you, I'll ride right over you," cried Raoul, now thoroughly enraged.

And he urged his horse on.

But Frederick seized the horse by the bridle, and with a violent jerk forced the animal back upon its haunches.

"How dare you touch my horse, you scoundrel!" roared Raoul, raising his whip and striking at random, but the blow fell only upon empty air.

"I consider the blow and the insulting epithet received, M. de Pont Brillant, and now you will indeed be a coward if you don't dismount at once and give me the satisfaction I demand."

As we have remarked before, Raoul was naturally brave; he was also as experienced in the ways of the world as most young men of twenty-five, so this time he answered very seriously and with remarkable good sense and firmness:

"You have charged me with cowardice, and you have grossly insulted me besides, so I tried to chastise you as one chastises a vagabond who insults you on a street corner. Unfortunately the darkness rendered my attempts futile, and you will be obliged to take the will for the deed. If this doesn't satisfy you, you know who I am and you can come to the Château de Pont Brillant to-morrow with two honourable men, if you know any, which I doubt very much, judging from your actions. These gentlemen can confer with the Vicomte de Marcilly and M. le Duc de Morville, my seconds. Your seconds will tell my seconds your name and the cause of the challenge you say you sent me this morning. These gentlemen will decide between them what should be done. I am perfectly willing to abide by their decision. That is the way such affairs are managed among well-bred people. As you don't know, I will endeavour to teach you."

"And you refuse to fight me here and now?"

"I do, most decidedly."

"Take care. Either you or I will remain here!"

"Then it will be you, so good night," said Raoul.

As he spoke he plunged his spurs into his horse's sides. The animal made a powerful spring forward, hurling Frederick to the ground.

When Madame Bastien's son, still stunned from his fall, staggered to his feet, he heard the sound of Raoul's horse's hoofs already dying away in the distance.

After a brief moment of stupor, Frederick uttered a cry of ferocious joy, and, picking up his gun, climbed one of the almost perpendicular banks on the side of the road with the aid of the pine saplings, and plunged headlong into the forest.

CHAPTER XIV

WHILE these events were transpiring in the forest of Pont Brillant, Madame Bastien was a prey to the most poignant anxiety. Faithful to the promise she had made Frederick the evening before, she waited until nearly one o'clock in the afternoon before entering her son's room. Believing he was still sleeping, she hoped he would derive much benefit from this restful slumber.

The young mother was in her chamber, which adjoined her son's room, listening every now and then for some sound that would seem to indicate that her son was awake, when Marguerite, their old servant, came in to ask for some instructions.

"Speak low, and close the door carefully," said Marie. "I don't want my son waked."

"M. Frederick, madame; why, he went out this morning at sunrise with his gun."

To rush into her son's bedroom was the work of only an instant.

Frederick was not there; his gun, too, was missing.

Several hours passed, but Frederick did not appear, and the light of the dull November day was already beginning to wane when Marguerite came running in.

"Madame, madame," she exclaimed, "here is Father André! He saw M. Frederick this morning."

"You saw my son this morning, André? What did he say to you? Where is he now?" cried Madame Bastien, eagerly.

"Yes, madame, M. Frederick came to me for some bullets about sunrise this morning."

"Bullets? What did he want of them?" asked the anxious mother, trying to drive away the horrible suspicion that had suddenly presented itself to her mind. "Did he want them for hunting?"

"Of course, madame; for M. Frederick told me that Jean François – you know Jean François, the farmer near Coudraie?"

"Yes, yes, I know; go on."

"It seems that Jean François told M. Frederick yesterday that a wild boar got into his garden a night or two ago, and ruined his potatoes; and M. Frederick told me he was going to station himself in a hiding-place that Jean François knew of, and kill the animal."

"But that is so dangerous," cried Madame Bastien. "Frederick never shot at a boar in his life. If he misses, he is sure to be killed."

"I don't think you need feel any anxiety, madame. M. Frederick is an excellent shot, and – "

"Then my son is at the farmer's house now, I suppose?"

"I presume so, as he is going with the farmer this evening."

A quarter of an hour afterward the young mother, panting and breathless, – for she had run every step of the way, – knocked at the door of the farmhouse, where Jean François and his wife and children were seated around the fire.

"Jean François, take me where my son is at once," cried Madame Bastien; then she added, reproachfully, "How could you allow a youth of his age to expose himself to such danger? But come, I entreat you, come, it may not be too late to prevent this imprudence on his part."

The farmer and his wife exchanged looks of profound astonishment, then Jean François said:

"Excuse me, madame, but I've no idea what you mean."

"Didn't you complain to my son last night of a wild boar that had been ravaging your garden?"

"Oh, the boars find so many nuts in the forest this year that they are not inclined to leave it. They have done us no damage up to the present time, thank Heaven."

"But you urged my son to come and take a shot at some boar."

"No, madame, no; I never even spoke of any boar to him."

Overcome with dread and consternation, Marie stood perfectly silent and motionless for a moment. At last she murmured:

"Frederick lied to André. And those bullets – my God! – those bullets, what did he intend to do with them?"

The honest farmer, seeing Madame Bastien's intense anxiety, and thinking to reassure her at least in a measure, said to her:

"I never said anything to M. Frederick about hunting boars, but if you want to find him, I think I know where he is."

"You have seen him, then?"

"Yes, madame. Madame knows that steep hill about a mile from the Vieille Coupe road, as you go to the château through the forest?"

"Yes, yes; what of it?"

"Why, just at dusk I was coming down that hill on my way home, when I saw M. Frederick come out of the forest and cross the road on the run."

"How long ago was this?"

"At least half an hour."

"Jean François, you are a good man. I am in great trouble. Take me to the place where you saw my son, I implore you," pleaded the young mother.

"I see what the trouble is, madame, and I don't know but you have good cause to feel anxious – "

"Go on – go on."

"Well, the fact is that you're afraid that M. Frederick may be caught poaching in the Pont Brillant woods. I feel in the same way, madame, and I honestly think we have reason to be alarmed, for the young marquis is bitter against poachers, and as jealous of his game as his deceased father used to be. His guards are always on the watch, and if they find M. Frederick poaching it will go hard with him."

"Yes, yes, that is what I am afraid of," replied Madame Bastien, quickly. "You see we haven't a minute to lose. Jean François, I must get my son away at any cost."

CHAPTER XV

WHEN Marie Bastien and her guide left the farmhouse they found that the fog had lifted, and that the moon was shining brightly.

A profound silence reigned.

Jean François strode on for a moment or two in silence, then, moderating his pace, he turned and said:

"Pardon, me, madame, I am going too fast, perhaps."

"Too fast? Oh, no, my friend, you cannot go too fast. Go on, go on, I can keep up with you."

Then, after they had walked a few minutes longer in silence, Marie asked:

"When you saw my son, did he seem excited or agitated?" And as the farmer turned to reply, Madame Bastien exclaimed:

"Don't lose a minute, talk as we walk."

"I can hardly say, madame. I saw him come out of the forest, run across the road, and enter a thicket which he had probably selected as a hiding-place."

"And you think you would know this thicket?"

"Unquestionably, madame. It is only about ten rods from the sign-post on the main road to the château."

"What a distance it is, Jean François! Shall we never get there?"

"It will take a quarter of an hour longer."

"A quarter of an hour!" murmured the young mother. "Alas! so many things may happen in a quarter of an hour."

Madame Bastien and her guide hurried on, though more than once the young woman was obliged to press both hands upon her breast to still the violent throbbing of her heart.

"What time do you think it is, Jean François?" she asked a few minutes afterward.

"Judging from the moon, I think it must be about seven o'clock."

"And when we reach the edge of the forest we are near the thicket, you say?"

"Not more than a hundred yards at most, madame."

"You had better enter one side of the thicket, Jean François, and I will enter the other, and we will both call Frederick at the top of our voices. If he does not answer us," continued the young woman with an involuntary shudder, "if he does not answer us, we shall be obliged to continue our search, for we must not fail to find him."

"Certainly, madame, but if you will take my advice you will not call M. Frederick."

"But why not?"

"We might give warning to the gamekeepers who are probably on the watch, for a bright moonlight night like this seems to have been made expressly for poachers."

"You are right. But do you hear that?" she exclaimed, pausing and listening attentively. "It sounds like the ring of horse's hoofs."

"It is, madame. It may be that the head gamekeeper is making his rounds. Now we have reached the edge of the forest, madame, we will take this short cut, for it will take us straight to the guide-post, only look out for your face, for there are so many holly-bushes."

And more than once Marie's delicate hands were torn and lacerated by the sharp points of the holly-leaves, but she was not even conscious of it.

"Those bullets, why did he want those bullets?" she said to herself. "But I will not allow myself to think of it. I should die of terror, and I need all my strength."

Just then the sound of horse's hoofs, which had seemed to come from a long way off, rang out louder and louder, then ceased entirely, as if the animal had paused entirely or settled down into a walk to ascend a very steep hill.

"It was only about twenty yards from here on the top of the hill that I saw M. Frederick enter that thicket on the edge of the road," said the farmer, pointing to a large clump of young oaks. "I will go around on the other side of the thicket, you can enter it on this side, so we cannot fail to find M. Frederick if he is still there. In case I meet him before you do, I shall tell him that you want him to give up his poaching at once, sha'n't I, madame?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.