ЭЖЕН СЮ

LUXURY - GLUTTONY: TWO OF THE SEVEN CARDINAL SINS

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Содержание

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MADELEINE
LUXURY

CHAPTER I

The palace of the Élysée-Bourbon, — the old hôtel of the Marquise de Pompadour, — situated in the middle of the Faubourg St. Honoré, was, previous to the last revolution, furnished, as every one knows, for the occupancy of foreign royal highnesses, — Roman Catholic, Protestant, or Mussulman, from the princes of the German confederation to Ibrahim Pacha.

About the end of the month of July, in a year long past, at eleven o'clock in the morning, several young secretaries and gentlemen belonging to the retinue of his Royal Highness, the Archduke Leopold Maximilian, who had occupied the Élysée for six weeks, met in one of the official parlours of the palace.

"The review on the Field of Mars in honour of his Royal Highness is prolonged," remarked one of the company. "The audience of the prince will be crowded this morning."

"The fact is," replied another, "five or six persons have already been waiting a half-hour, and monseigneur, in his rigorous military punctuality, will regret this enforced delay."

Then one of the doors opened; a young man not more than twenty years old at most, a guest of the house, crossed the parlour, and entered an adjoining chamber, after having saluted, with mingled kindness and embarrassment, the speakers, who rose upon seeing him, thus testifying a deference which seemed unwarranted by his age and position.

When he had disappeared, one of the gentlemen, alluding to him, said:

"Poor Count Frantz, always so timid! A young girl of fifteen, just out of the convent, would have more assurance! To look at him, who would believe him capable of such rare bravery, and that, too, for three years in the Caucasus war? And that he came so valiantly and brilliantly out of that duel forced on him in Vienna? I, gentlemen, picture to myself Count Frantz modestly dropping his eyes as he gave the Circassians a thrust of his sword."

"Besides, I believe that his Royal Highness makes a decided convenience of the ingenuousness of his son — "

"The devil! No indiscretion, dear sir!"

"Let me finish, please. I say that monseigneur makes a convenience of the unconquerable ingenuousness of his godson."

"Well and good. And I think with you that the prince does not see this handsome boy exposed to the temptations of wicked Paris, without some anxiety. But what are you smiling at, my dear sir?"

"Nothing."

"Do you think that Count Frantz has had some love affair, in spite of his apparent innocence?"

"You can see after a little, gentlemen, all the fine things a smile may mean, for I call you to witness I am satisfied with smiling."

"Seriously, my dear sir, what do you think of Count Frantz?"

"I think nothing, I say nothing, I shall be as mute as a diplomatist whose interest it is to keep silent, or as a young officer of the noble guards when he passes, for the first time, under the inspection of monseigneur."

"The truth is, the prince has a glance which intimidates the boldest. But to return to Count Frantz."

This conversation was interrupted by a number of persons who entered the official chamber.

The newcomers banished the thought of Count Frantz, and two or three voices asked at once:

"Well, what about your sightseeing? Is this famous manufactory in the Faubourg St. Marceau worth the trouble of a visit?"

"For my part, gentlemen, I am always very curious about the construction of machinery," replied one who had just entered. "The whole morning has been interesting, and I declare M. Charles Dutertre, the proprietor of this factory, one of the most accomplished and intelligent machinists that I know, besides being a most agreeable man; I intend to persuade monseigneur to visit his workshops."

"Well and good, my dear sir; we will not accuse you of wasting your time in frivolities, but I have not such high pretensions, and my pretension is only in a state of hope."

"And what hope?"

"To be invited to dine with the celebrated Doctor Gasterini."

"The most illustrious, the most profound gourmand of Europe."

"They say, really, that his table is an ideal of the paradise of gourmands."

"I do not know, alas! if this paradise will be as open to me as the other, but I hope so."

"I confess my weakness. Of all that I have seen in Paris, what has most charmed me, fascinated me, dazzled me, I will even say instructed — "

"Well, is what?"

"It is — our proud and modest Germany will blush at the blasphemy — it is — "

"Do finish!"

"It is the Mabille ball!"

The laughter and the exclamations provoked by this frank avowal lasted until one of the secretaries of the archduke entered, holding two letters in his hand, and saying, gaily:

"Gentlemen, fresh news from Bologna and Venice!"

"Bravo, my dear Ulrik, what news?"

"The most curious, the most extraordinary in the world!"

"Really?"

"Quick, tell us, dear Ulrik."

"In the first place, Bologna, and Venice afterward, have been for several days in a state of incredible agitation, for reason of a series of events not less incredible."

"A revolution?"

"A movement of young Italy?"

"Perhaps a new mandate from the papal defender?"

"No, gentleman, it concerns a woman."

"A woman?"

"Yes, if it is not the devil, which I am inclined to believe."

"Ulrik, you are putting us to entreaty, do explain."

"Do you remember, gentlemen, last year, having heard in Germany that young Mexican widow, the Marquise de Miranda, spoken of?"

"Zounds! the one whom our poet, Moser-Hartmann, wrote of in such magnificent and passionate verse, under the name of the modern Aphrodite."

"Ah, ah, ah, what a charming mistake!" said one of the inquirers, roaring with laughter. "Moser-Hartmann, the religious and soulful poet, the chaste poet, pure and cold as the immaculate snow,

sings Aphrodite, in burning verses. I have heard those admirable verses repeated, but, evidently, they are the production of another Hartmann."

"And I assure you, my dear sir, and Ulrik will confirm it, that this poem, which they say rightfully ranks with the most beautiful odes of Sappho, is truly the work of Moser-Hartmann."

"Nothing more true," replied Ulrik. "I heard Moser-Hartmann recite the verses himself, — they are worthy of antiquity."

"Then I believe you, but how do you explain this sudden incomprehensible transformation?"

"Ah, my God! This transformation which has changed a cold, correct man, but a man of estimable talent, indeed, a man of genius, full of fire and power, whose name is renowned through Europe — this transformation has been wrought by the woman whom the poet has praised, by the Marquise de Miranda."

"Moser-Hartmann so changed? I would have thought the thing impossible!"

"Bah!" replied Ulrik, "the marquise has done several things, and here is one of her best tricks, written to me from Bologna. There was there a cardinal legate of the Pope, the terror and aversion of the country."

"His name is Orsini, a man as detestable as he is detested."

"And his exterior reveals his nature. I saw him in Lombardy. What a cadaverous, sinister face! He always seemed to me the very type of an inquisitor."

"Well, the marquise took him to a ball at the Casino in Bologna, disguised as a Hungarian hussar!"

"The cardinal legate as a Hungarian hussar!" cried the company, in one voice.

"Come, Ulrik, you are telling an idle tale."

"You can read this letter, and when you see who signs it you will doubt no longer, skeptical as you are," replied Ulrik. "Yes, the marquise made Orsini accompany her so disguised; then, in the midst of the dance, she tore his mask from his face and said, in a loud voice: 'Good evening, Cardinal Orsini,' and, laughing like a crazy woman, she disappeared, leaving the legate exposed to the hoots and hisses of the exasperated crowd. He would have run some danger if his escort had not protected him. The next day Bologna was in a stir, demanding the dismissal of Orsini, who, after two days of excitement, was forced to leave the city by night. In the evening every house was illuminated for joy, and my correspondent says the monogram of the marquise was seen on many transparencies."

"And what became of her?"

"She was not seen again, she left for Venice," replied Ulrik, showing a second letter, "and there, they write me, another thing has happened."

"What a woman! What a woman!"

"What sort of a woman is she?"

"Have you seen her?"

"No."

"Nor I."

"Nor I."

"They say she is very tall and very slender."

"They told me she was above the ordinary height."

"One thing is sure, she is a brunette, because Moser-Hartmann praises her black eyes and black eyebrows."

"All I can say is," replied Ulrik, "that in this letter from Venice, which place the marquise has recently left for France, as I am informed, she is poetically called the 'blonde star,' so I think she must be a blonde."

"But what has she done in Venice? What has happened there?"

"My faith!" exclaimed Ulrik, "it is an adventure which smacks of the manners of pagan antiquity and the middle ages of Italy at the same time."

Unfortunately for the curiosity of Ulrik's auditors, the sudden beating of a drum outside announced the return of the Archduke Leopold, and each person in the house of the prince at once went to his post, ready to receive the Royal Highness.

In fact, the sentinel of the Élysée, descrying the approach of several carriages in the livery of the King of the French, had called "To arms!" The soldiers on guard with their commanding officer were immediately in line, and at the moment the carriages entered successively the immense court of the Élysée, the drums beat and the troops presented arms.

The first of the carriages stopped before the palace; the footmen in bright red livery opened the door, and his Royal Highness, the Archduke Maximilian Leopold, slowly ascended the steps, conversing with a colonel, officer of ordinance, whose office it was to accompany him; a few steps behind the prince came his aids-de-camp, dressed in brilliant foreign uniforms, and took their places in order at the foot of the steps by the royal carriages. The archduke, thirty-nine years old, was robust, yet slenderly proportioned. He wore with military severity the full-dress uniform of the field-marshal, white coat, with epaulettes of gold; scarlet casimir breeches over which reached the shining black of his high riding-boots, a little dusty, as he had assisted in the review appointed in his honour. The great cordon red, the collar of the fleece of gold, and five or six medallions of different orders ornamented his breast; his hair was pale blond, as was his long moustache turned up in military style, which gave a still more severe expression to his features, and strongly augmented the breadth of his chin and the prominent angle of his nose; his eye, cold and penetrating, half-covered by the eyelid, was set under a very heavy eyebrow, which gave him the air of always looking very high. This severe and disdainful glance, united to an imperious manner and an inflexible carriage of the head, gave to the whole personal bearing of the archduke a remarkable character of arrogant, icy authority.

About a quarter of an hour after the prince had returned to the Élysée, the carriage of a French minister, and that of an ambassador from a great power in the North, stopped successively before the entrance, and the statesman and the diplomatist entered the palace.

Almost at the same moment, one of the principal persons of this story arrived on foot in the court of the Élysée-Bourbon.

M. Pascal, for such was our hero's name, appeared to be about thirty-six years old. He was of middle stature, very dark, and wore quite a long beard, as rough and black as his eyebrows, beneath which glittered two little very piercing gray eyes. As he had the habit of holding his head down, and his two hands in the pockets of his trousers, the attitude served to increase the roundness of his broad shoulders. His features were especially remarkable for their expression of sarcastic sternness, to which was joined that air of inexorable assurance peculiar to people who are convinced of their power and are vain of it. A narrow black cravat, tied, as they say, à la Colin, a long waistcoat of Scotch cloth, a light greatcoat, whitish in colour, a gray hat well worn, and wide nankin trousers, in the pockets of which M. Pascal kept his hands, made up his costume of doubtful cleanliness, and perfectly in harmony with the extreme heat of the season and the habitual carelessness of the wearer.

When M. Pascal passed before the porter's lodge, he was challenged by that functionary, who from the depth of his armchair called:

"Eh! — speak, sir, where are you going?"

Either M. Pascal did not hear the porter, or he did not wish to give himself the trouble to reply, as he continued to walk toward the entrance of the palace without saying a word.

The porter, forced to rise from his armchair, ran after the mute visitor, and said, impatiently:

"I ask again, sir, where are you going? You can reply, can you not?"

M. Pascal stopped, took a disdainful survey of his interlocutor, shrugged his shoulders, and said, as he turned again toward the entrance: "I am going — to see the archduke."

The porter knew the class with which he was accustomed to deal. He could not imagine that this visitor, in a summer greatcoat and loose cravat, really had an audience with the prince, or would dare to present himself before his Highness in a costume so impertinently outside of the regulation, for all

persons who had the honour of being received at the palace were usually attired in black; so taking M. Pascal for some half-witted or badly informed tradesman, he followed him, calling in a loud voice:

"But sir, tradespeople who come to see his Highness do not pass by the grand staircase. Down there at the right you will see the door for tradesmen and servants by which you ought to enter."

M. Pascal did not care to talk; he shrugged his shoulders again, and continued his march toward the staircase without a word.

The porter, exasperated by this silence and this obstinacy, seized M. Pascal by the arm, and, speaking louder still, said:

"Must I tell you again, sir, that you cannot pass that way?"

"What do you mean, scoundrel?" cried M. Pascal, in a tone of contempt and anger, as if this outrage on the part of the porter was as insolent as inconceivable, "do you know to whom you are talking?"

There was in these words an expression of authority so threatening, that the poor porter, frightened for a moment, stammered:

"Monsieur, — I — do — not — know."

The great door of the vestibule was suddenly opened. One of the aids-de-camp of the prince, having seen from the parlour window the altercation between the visitor and the porter, hastily descended the staircase, and, eagerly approaching M. Pascal, said to him in excellent French, with a sympathetic tone:

"Ah, monsieur, his Royal Highness will, I am sure, be much grieved by this misunderstanding. Do me the honour to follow me; I will introduce you at once. I have just received orders from monseigneur concerning you, sir."

M. Pascal bowed his head in assent, and followed the aid-de-camp, leaving the porter amazed and afflicted by his own want of address.

When M. Pascal and his guide arrived in the chamber of waiting, where other officials were congregated, the young officer said:

"The audience of his Royal Highness is crowded this morning, because the review detained monseigneur much longer than he expected, so, desiring to make you wait as short a time as possible, he has ordered me to conduct you, upon your arrival, into a chamber adjoining his private office, where his Royal Highness will meet you as soon as his conference with the minister of foreign affairs is ended."

M. Pascal again made sign of assent, and, following the aid-de-camp, crossed a dark passage, and entered a chamber overlooking the magnificent garden of the Élysée-Bourbon.

Before withdrawing, the aid-de-camp, not a little annoyed by the unfortunate altercation between the porter and M. Pascal, remarked the negligent attire of the latter. Habituated to the severe formalities of etiquette, the young courtier was shocked at the unconventional dress of the person he was about to introduce, and hesitated between the fear of antagonising a man like Pascal and the desire to protest against the unsuitability of his bearing as an insult to the dignity of a prince, who was known to be inexorable in all that pertained to the respect due his rank; but the first fear prevailed, and as it was too late to insist upon a change of dress consistent with the requirements of court etiquette, the young courtier said:

"As soon as the foreign minister withdraws from the presence of his Royal Highness, I will inform him, sir, that you are at his orders."

These last words, "that you are at his orders," did not appear to sound very well in the ears of M. Pascal. A sardonic smile played upon his lips, but making himself at home, so to speak, and finding the temperature of the room too warm, he opened one of the windows, placed his elbows on the balustrade, and, keeping his hat on his head, occupied himself with a survey of the garden.

CHAPTER II

Everybody knows the garden of the Élysée, that charming little park, planted with the most beautiful trees in the world, whose fresh green turf is watered by a clear winding river; a terraced walk, shaded by elms a century old, borders this park on the side of the avenue called Marigny; a similar walk, parallel to it, bounds it on the opposite side, and a very low wall separates it from the neighbouring gardens. This last mentioned walk ended a short distance from the window where M. Pascal was so comfortably seated, and soon his attention was keenly awakened by several incidents.

The young man who had passed through the parlour, occupied by secretaries and gentlemen, and who had, for reason of his timidity, been the subject of several remarks, was slowly promenading the shaded walk. He was of slender and graceful stature. Every few moments he stopped, stooped down, and remained immovable a second, then continued his promenade. When he reached the extremity of the walk, he approached, almost by stealth, the wall bordering upon the adjacent garden, and, as at this point the wall was hardly more than four feet high, he leaned upon it, apparently absorbed in reflection or the expectation of meeting another person.

So long as the promenader kept his back turned to M. Pascal, who now began to feel very curious concerning him, his features of course could not be distinguished; but when he turned, after having made some desired discovery, and retraced his steps, he was face to face with his observer at the window.

Count Frantz de Neuberg, as we have said, passed for the godson of the archduke, by whom he was tenderly loved. According to the rumours of the court, his Royal Highness, having had no children since his marriage with the Princess of Saxe-Teschen, had abundant reason for exercising paternal interest in Frantz de Neuberg, the secret fruit of a first love.

Frantz, scarcely twenty years old at the time of this history, presented the perfect type of the melancholy beauty of the North. His long blond hair, parted in the middle of a brow as white and ingenuous as that of a young girl, framed a face whose regularity was without a flaw. His large blue eyes, soft and dreaming, seemed to reflect the purity of his soul, and an incipient beard, shading his chin and upper lip with a silken, golden down, accentuated the virility of his charming face.

As he came up the walk, Frantz more and more attracted the attention of M. Pascal, who looked at him with a sort of admiring surprise, for it would have been difficult not to observe the rare perfection of the young man's features; but when at a short distance from the window he encountered the fixed and persistent gaze of M. Pascal, he appeared not less provoked than embarrassed, blushed, looked downward, and, turning on his heel, abruptly, quickened his pace until he reached the middle of the walk, where he began again his slow promenade, evidently constrained by the thought that a stranger was watching his movements. He hardly dared approach the boundary of the neighbouring garden, but suddenly, forgetting all preoccupation, he ran toward the wall at the sight of a little straw hat which appeared on the other side, and encased in its frame lined with rose-coloured silk was the freshest, most entrancing countenance of fifteen years that ever entered into a young man's dream.

"Mlle. Antonine," said Frantz quickly, in a low voice, "some one is looking at us."

"This evening," murmured a sweet voice, in reply.

And the little straw hat disappeared as by enchantment, as the young girl jumped from a bench she had mounted on the other side of the wall. But as compensation, no doubt, for this abrupt retreat, a beautiful rose fell at the feet of Frantz, who picked it up and passionately pressed it to his lips, then, hiding the flower in his waistcoat, the young man disappeared in a thicket instead of continuing his promenade in the long walk. Notwithstanding the rapidity with which these incidents transpired, and the instantaneous disappearance of the little straw hat, M. Pascal had seen distinctly the exquisite loveliness of the young girl's face, and Frantz also, as he kissed the rose which fell at his feet.

The hard and saturnine features of M. Pascal took on a strange and gloomy expression, where one could read violent anger mingled with jealousy, pain, and hatred. For some moments, his physiognomy, almost terrifying in its malevolence, betrayed the man, who, accustomed to see all bend before him, is capable of sentiments and actions of diabolical wickedness when an unforeseen obstacle contradicts his iron will.

"She! she! here in this garden near the Élysée!" exclaimed he, with concentrated rage. "What is she doing there? Triple fool that I am! she comes here to coquet with this puny, blond youth. Perhaps she lives in the next hôtel. Misery! misery! to find out the place where she dwells after having done everything in vain to discover it since this damned pretty face of fifteen struck my eyes, and made me a fool, — I, who believed myself dead to these sudden and frantic caprices, compared to which what are called violent passions of the heart are ice. I have met this little girl three times, and feel myself, as in my young days, capable of anything in order to possess her. How jealousy irritates and devours me this moment! Misery! it is stupid, it is silly, but oh, how I suffer!"

As he uttered these words, M. Pascal's face expressed malicious and ferocious grief; then shaking his fist at the side of the wall where the little straw hat had disappeared, he muttered, in a voice of concentrated rage:

"You shall pay for it. Go, little girl, and whatever it may cost me, you shall belong to me."

And sitting with his elbows on the balustrade, unable to detach his angry glances from the spot where he had seen Frantz speak to the young girl, M. Pascal presented a picture of fury and despair, when one of the doors of the parlour softly opened, and the archduke entered.

The prince, evidently, felt so sure that he would meet his expected visitor face to face, that, beforehand, instead of his usual cold arrogance, he had assumed a most agreeable expression, entering the room with a smile upon his lips.

But M. Pascal, leaning half way out of the window, had not heard the door open, and, never suspecting the presence of the prince, he remained seated, his back to the Royal Highness, and his elbows on the sill of the window.

A physiognomist witnessing this silent scene would have found in it a curious study of the reaction of feeling in the countenance of the prince.

At the sight of M. Pascal leaning out of the window, wearing a summer greatcoat, and violating all propriety by keeping his hat on his head, the archduke stopped short; his assumed smile vanished from his lips, and, taking a prouder attitude than ordinary, he stiffened himself in his handsome uniform, turned purple with anger, knit his eyebrows, while his eyes flashed with indignation. But soon reflection, doubtless, appeasing this inner storm, the features of the prince took on an expression of resignation as bitter as it was sad, and he bowed his head, as if he submitted to a fatal necessity.

Stifling a sigh of offended pride as he threw a glance of vindictive contempt on Pascal at the window, the prince again assumed, as we have said, his smile of affability, and walked toward the casement, coughing loud enough to announce his presence, and spare himself the last humiliation of touching the shoulder of our familiar visitor in order to attract his attention.

At the sonorous "hum-hum!" of his Royal Highness, M. Pascal turned around suddenly. The gloomy expression of his face was succeeded by a sort of cruel and malicious satisfaction, as if the occasion had furnished a victim upon whom he could vent his suppressed wrath.

M. Pascal approached the prince, saluted him in a free and easy manner, and holding his hat in one hand, while the other was plunged deep in his pocket, he said:

"A thousand pardons, monseigneur, really I did not know you were there."

"I am persuaded of that, M. Pascal," replied the prince, with ill-disguised haughtiness.

Then he added:

"Please follow me into my study, sir. I have some official news to communicate to you."

And he walked toward his study, when M. Pascal, with apparent calmness, for this man had a wonderful control over himself when it was necessary, said:

"Monseigneur, will you permit me one question?"

"Speak, sir," replied the prince, stopping and turning to his visitor, with surprise.

"Monseigneur, who is that young man of twenty at the most, with long blond hair, who promenades in the walk which can be seen from this window? Who is he, monseigneur?"

"You mean, no doubt, monsieur, my godson, Count Frantz de Neuberg."

"Ah, this young man is your godson, monseigneur? I congratulate you sincerely, — one could not see a prettier boy."

"Is he not?" replied the prince, sensible of this praise, even in the mouth of Pascal. "Has he not a charming face?"

"That is what I have just been observing at my leisure, monseigneur."

"And Count Frantz has not only a charming face," added the prince; "he has fine qualities of heart and great bravery."

"I am enchanted, monseigneur, to know that you have such an accomplished godson. Has he been in Paris long?"

"He arrived with me."

"And he will depart with you, monseigneur, for it must be painful for you to be separated from this amiable young man?"

"Yes, monsieur, I hope to take Count Frantz with me back to Germany."

"A thousand pardons, monseigneur, for my indiscreet curiosity, but your godson is one of those persons in whom one is interested in spite of himself. Now, I am at your service."

"Then follow me, if you please, monsieur."

Pascal nodded his head in assent, and, walking side by side with the archduke, he reached the door of the study with him, then, stopping with a gesture of deference, which was only another impertinence, he bowed slightly, and said to the prince, as if his Highness had hesitated to enter first:

"After you, monseigneur, after you."

The prince understood the insolence, but swallowed it, and entered his study, making a sign to Pascal to follow him.

The latter, although unaccustomed to the ceremonial of the court, had too much penetration not to comprehend the import of his acts and words. He had not only the consciousness of his insolence, instigated by his recent and suppressed resentment, but this insolence he had actually studied and calculated, and even in his interview had considered the question of addressing his Royal Highness as monsieur, simply; but, by a refinement of intelligent impertinence, he thought the ceremonious appellation of monseigneur would render his familiarities still more disagreeable to the dignity and good breeding of the prince.

Let us turn back to an analysis of the character of Pascal, — a character less eccentric, perhaps, than it appears at first to be. Let us say, simply, that for ten years of his life this man, born in a humble and precarious position, had as a day-labourer and drudge submitted to the most painful humiliations, the most insolent domination, and the most outrageous contempt. Thus, bitter and implacable hatreds were massed together in his soul, and the day when, in his turn, he became powerful, he abandoned himself without scruple and without remorse to the fierce joy of reprisal, and it gave him little concern if his revenge fell upon an innocent head.

The archduke, instead of a superior mind, possessed a long, practical acquaintance with men, acquired in the exercise of supreme authority in the military hierarchy of his country; besides, in his second interview with M. Pascal, — at which interview we have assisted, — he had understood the significance of the studied insolence of this person, and when, as he entered his study with him, he saw him, without invitation, seat himself familiarly in the armchair just occupied by a prime minister, whom he found full of courtesy and deference, the prince felt a new and cruel oppression of the heart.

The penetrating glance of Pascal surprised the expression of this feeling on the face of the archduke, and he said to himself, with triumphant disdain: "Here is a prince born on the steps of a

throne, a cousin, at least, of all the kings of Europe, a generalissimo of an army of a hundred thousand soldiers, here he is in all the glory of his battle uniform, adorned with all the insignia of honour and war. This highness, this man, despises me in his pride of a sovereign race. He hates me because he has need of me, and knows well that he must humiliate himself; nevertheless, this man, in spite of his contempt, in spite of his hatred, I hold in my power, and I intend to make him feel it keenly, for to-day my heart is steeped in gall."

CHAPTER III

M. Pascal, having seated himself in the gilded armchair on the side of the table opposite the prince, first seized a mother-of-pearl paper-cutter that he found under his hand, and, whirling it incessantly, said:

"Monseigneur, if it is agreeable to you, let us talk of business, for at a certain hour I must be in the Faubourg St. Marceau, at the house of a manufacturer, who is one of my friends."

"I wish to inform you, monsieur," replied the prince, restraining himself with difficulty, "that I have already postponed until to-morrow other audiences that should have taken place to-day, that I might devote all my time to you."

"That is very kind of you, monseigneur, but let us come to the point."

The prince took up from the table a long sheet of official paper, and, handing it to M. Pascal, said to him:

"This note will prove to you, monsieur, that all the parties interested in the transfer that is proposed to me not only authorise me formally to accept it, but willingly offer their pledges, and even protect all the accidents of my acceptance."

M. Pascal, without moving from his armchair, extended his hand from one side of the table to the other, to receive the note, and, taking it, said:

"There was absolutely nothing to be done without this security."

And he began to read slowly, nibbling the while the mother-of-pearl knife, which he did not surrender for a moment.

The prince fixed an anxious, penetrating glance on Pascal, trying to divine, from the expression of his face, if his visitor had confidence in the security offered.

At the end of a few moments, M. Pascal discontinued his reading, saying between his teeth, with an offended air, as if he were talking to himself:

"Ho! ho! This Article 7 does not suit me at all, — not at all!"

"Explain yourself, monsieur," said the prince, seriously annoyed.

"However," continued M. Pascal, taking up his reading again, without replying to the archduke, and pretending to be talking to himself, "this Article 7 is corrected by Article 8, — yes, — and, in fact, it is quite good, — it is very good."

The countenance of the prince seemed to brighten, for, earnestly occupied with the powerful interests of which M. Pascal had necessarily become the umpire, he forgot the impertinence and calculated wickedness of this man, who found a savage delight in making his victim pass through all the perplexities of fear and hope.

At the end of a few moments, each one of which brought new anxiety to the prince, M. Pascal exclaimed:

"Impossible, that! impossible! For me everything would be annulled by this first supplementary article. It is a mockery!"

"Monsieur," cried the prince, "speak more clearly!"

"Pardon me, monseigneur, at that moment I was reading to myself. Well and good, if you wish, I will read for both of us."

The archduke bowed his head, turned red with suppressed indignation, appeared discouraged, and leaned his head on his hand.

M. Pascal, continuing his perusal of the paper, threw a glance by stealth at the prince, and replied after a few moments, in a more satisfied tone:

"This is a sure, incontestable security."

Then, as the prince seemed to regain hope, he added:

"Unfortunately, this security is apart from — "

He did not finish, but continued his reading in silence.

Never a solicitor in distress imploring a haughty and unfeeling protector, never a despairing borrower humbly addressing a dishonest and whimsical usurer, never accused seeking to read his pardon or condemnation in the countenance of his judge, experienced the torture felt by the prince while M. Pascal was reading the note which he had examined and which he now laid on the table.

"Well, monsieur," said the prince, swallowing his impatience, "what do you decide?"

"Monseigneur, will you have the kindness to lend me a pen and some paper?"

The prince pushed an inkstand, a pen, and some paper before M. Pascal, who began a long series of figures, sometimes lifting his eyes to the ceiling, as if to make a calculation in his head, sometimes muttering incomplete sentences, such as —

"No — I am mistaken because — but I was about to forget — it is evident — the balance will be equal if — "

After long expectation on the part of the prince, M. Pascal threw the pen down on the table, plunged both hands in the pockets of his trousers, threw his head back, and shut his eyes, as if making a last mental calculation, then, holding his head up, said in a short, peremptory voice:

"Impossible, monseigneur."

"What, monsieur!" cried the prince, dismayed. "You assured me in our first interview that the operation was practicable."

"Practicable, monseigneur, but not accomplished."

"But this note, monsieur, this note, joined to the securities I have offered you?"

"This note completes, I know, the securities indispensable to such an operation."

"Then, monsieur, how do you account for your refusal?"

"For particular reasons, monseigneur."

"But, I ask again, do I not offer all the security desirable?"

"Yes, monseigneur, I will say that I regard the operation not only feasible, but sure and advantageous to one who is willing to undertake it; so, I do not doubt, monseigneur, you can find — "

"Eh! monsieur," interrupted the prince, "you know that in the present financial crisis, and for other reasons which you understand as well as I, that you are the only person who can undertake this business."

"The preference of your Royal Highness honours and flatters me infinitely," said Pascal, with an accent of ironical recognition, "so I doubly regret my inability to meet it."

The prince perceived the sarcasm, and replied, feigning offence at the want of appreciation his kindness had met:

"You are unjust, monsieur. The proof that I adhered to my agreement with you in this affair is that I have refused to entertain the proposition of the house Durand."

"I am almost certain that it is a lie," thought M. Pascal, "but no matter, I will get information about the thing; besides, this house sometimes disturbs and cramps me. Fortunately, thanks to that knave, Marcelange, I have an excellent means of protecting myself from that inconvenience in the future."

"Another proof that I adhered directly to my personal agreement with you, M. Pascal," continued the prince, in a deferential tone, "is that I have desired no agent to come between us, certain that we would understand each other as the matter should be understood. Yes," added the archduke, with a still more insinuating tone, "I hoped that this just homage rendered to your financial intelligence, so universally recognised — "

"Ah, monseigneur."

"To your character as honourable as it is honoured — "

"Monseigneur, really, you overwhelm me."

"I hoped, I repeat, my dear M. Pascal, that in coming frankly to you to propose — what? — an operation whose solidity and advantage you recognise, you would appreciate my attitude, since it

appeals to the financier as much as to the private citizen. In short, I hoped to assure you, not only by pecuniary advantage, but by especial testimony, of my esteem and gratitude."

"Monseigneur — "

"I repeat it, my dear M. Pascal, of my gratitude, since, in making a successful speculation, you would render me an immense service, for you cannot know what the results of this loan I solicit from you would be to my dearest family interests."

"Monseigneur, I am ignorant of — "

"And when I speak to you of family interests," said the prince, interrupting M. Pascal, whom he hoped to bring back to his views, "when I speak of family interests, it is not enough; an important question of state also attaches to the transfer of the duchy that is offered me, and which I can acquire only through your powerful financial aid. So, in rendering me a personal service, you would be greatly useful to my nation, and you know, my dear M. Pascal, how great empires requite services done to the state."

"Excuse my ignorance, monseigneur, but I am altogether ignorant of the whole thing."

The prince smiled, remained silent a moment, and replied, with an accent he believed irresistible:

"My dear M. Pascal, are you acquainted with the celebrated banker, Tortolia?"

"I know him by name, monseigneur."

"Do you know that he is a prince of the Holy Empire?"

"Prince of the Holy Empire, monseigneur!" replied Pascal, with amazement.

"I have my man," thought the prince, and he replied aloud: "Do you know that the banker, Tortolia, is a great dignitary in one of the most coveted orders?"

"It would be possible, monseigneur."

"It is not only possible, but it is an actual fact, my dear M. Pascal. Now, I do not see why what has been done for M. Tortolia cannot be done for you."

"Could that be, monseigneur?"

"I say," repeated the prince, with emphasis, "I say I do not see why an illustrious title and high dignities should not recompense you also."

"Me, monseigneur?"

"You."

"Me, monseigneur, I become Prince Pascal?"

"Why not?"

"Come, come, monseigneur is laughing at his poor servant."

"No one has ever doubted my promise, monsieur, and it is almost an offence to me to believe me capable of laughing at you."

"Then, monseigneur, I would laugh at myself, very heartily and very long, if I were stupid enough to desire to pose as a prince, or duke, or marquis, in Europe's carnival of nobility! You see, monseigneur, I am only a poor devil of a plebeian, — my father was a peddler, and I have been a day-labourer. I have laid up a few cents, in attending to my small affairs. I have only my common sense, but this good common sense, monseigneur, will always prevent my decking myself out as the Marquis de la Janotière — that is a very pretty story by Voltaire, you ought to read it, monseigneur! — or making myself the laughing-stock of those malicious people who amuse themselves by creating marquises and princes out of poor folk."

The archduke was far from expecting this refusal and this bitter retort; however, he put a good face on it, and replied, significantly:

"M. Pascal, I admire this rough sincerity; I admire this disinterestedness. Thank God, there are other means of proving to you my gratitude, and, one day, my friendship."

"Your friendship, monseigneur?"

"It is because I know its worth," added the prince, with imposing dignity, "that I assure you of my friendship, if — "

"Your friendship for me, monseigneur," replied Pascal, interrupting the prince, "your friendship for me, who have, as the wicked ones say, increased my little possessions a hundredfold by dangerous methods, although I have come out of these calumniating accusations as white as a young dove?"

"It is because you have, as you say, monsieur, come out of these odious calumnies, by which all who elevate themselves by labour and merit are pursued, that I would assure you of my affectionate gratitude, if you render me the important service I expect of you."

"Monseigneur, I could not be more impressed or more flattered by your kindness, but unfortunately business is business," said M. Pascal, "and this affair you air does not suit me at all. I need not say how much it costs me to renounce the friendship of which your Royal Highness has desired to assure me."

At this response, bitter and humiliating in its insulting irony, the prince was on the point of flying into a passion, but, reflecting upon the shame and futility of such a transport of rage, he controlled himself, and, desiring to attempt a final effort, he said, in an aggrieved tone:

"So, M. Pascal, it will be said that I prayed, supplicated, and implored you in vain."

These words, "prayed, supplicated, implored," uttered in a tone of sincere distress, appeared in the eyes of the prince to make an impression on M. Pascal, and, in fact, did make a decided impression, inasmuch as, up to that moment, the archduke had not entirely abased himself, but seeing this royal person, after such obstinate refusal, willing to descend to further supplication, M. Pascal experienced an intensity of happiness that he had never known before.

The prince, observing his silence, believed his purpose was shaken, and added, readily:

"Come, my dear M. Pascal, I cannot appeal to your generous heart in vain."

"Really, monseigneur," replied the bloodthirsty villain, who, knowing the speculation to be a good one, was at heart disposed to undertake it, but wanted to realise pleasure as well as profit from it, "you have such a way of putting things. Business, I repeat, ought to be business only, but see now, in spite of myself, I yield like a child to sentiment I am so weak — "

"You consent?" interrupted the prince, radiant with joy, and he seized both hands of the financier in his own. "You consent, my worthy and kind M. Pascal?"

"How can I resist you, monseigneur?"

"At last!" cried the archduke, drawing a long breath of profound satisfaction, as if he had just escaped a frightful danger. "At last!"

"But, monseigneur," replied Pascal, "I must make one little condition."

"Oh, I shall not stand on that, whatever it may be. I subscribe to it beforehand."

"You pledge yourself to more, perhaps, than you think, monseigneur."

"What do you mean?" asked the prince, somewhat disquieted. "What condition do you speak of?"

"In three days, monseigneur, to the hour, I will inform you."

"What!" exclaimed the prince, astonished and crestfallen; "more delays. Do you not give me your positive promise?"

"In three days, monseigneur, I will give it to you, provided you accept my condition."

"But, pray, tell me this condition now."

"Impossible, monseigneur."

"My dear M. Pascal — "

"Monseigneur," replied Pascal, with ironical gravity, "it is not my habit to be weak twice in succession during one interview. It is now the hour for my appointment in the Faubourg St. Marceau; I have the honour of presenting my respectful compliments to your Royal Highness."

M. Pascal, leaving the prince full of vexation and concern, walked to the door, then turned, and said:

"To-day is Monday; on Thursday, at eleven o'clock, I shall have the honour of seeing your Royal Highness again, and will then submit my little condition."

"Very well, monsieur; on Thursday."

M. Pascal bowed profoundly, and went out.

When he passed through the parlour where the officials were assembled all rose respectfully, recognising the importance of the person whom the prince had just received. M. Pascal returned their courtesy with a patronising inclination of the head, and left the palace as he had entered it, both hands in his pockets, not denying himself the pleasure — for this man lost nothing — of stopping a minute before the lodge of the porter and saying to him:

"Well, scoundrel, will you recognise me another time?"

"Oh, I shall recognise monsieur hereafter! I beg monsieur to pardon my mistake."

"He begs me," said Pascal, half aloud, with a bitter smile. "They know how to beg from the Royal Highness to the porter."

M. Pascal, as he went out of the Élysée, fell again into painful reflections upon the subject of the young girl whose secret meeting with Count Frantz de Neuberg he had surprised. Wishing to know if she lived in the house contiguous to the palace, he was going to make inquiries, when, remembering that such a course might perhaps compromise his plans, he prudently resolved to wait until evening.

Seeing a hackney coach, he called the driver, entered the carriage, and said to him:

"Faubourg St. Marceau, fifteen; the large factory whose chimney you see from the street."

"The factory belonging to M. Dutertre? I know, citizen, I know; everybody knows that."

The coachman drove down the street.

CHAPTER IV

M. Pascal, as we have said, had spent a part of his life in a subordinate and precarious position, enduring the most ignominious treatment with a patience full of bitterness and hatred.

Born of a peddler who had amassed a competency by dint of privation and illicit or questionable traffic, he had commenced his business career as a day-labourer in the house of a provincial usurer, to whom Pascal's father had entrusted the care of his money.

The first years of our hero were passed in a state of servitude as hard as it was humiliating. Nevertheless, as he was endowed with considerable intelligence and unusual ingenuity, and as his despotic will could, upon necessity, hide itself under an exterior of insinuating meanness, — a dissimulation which was the result of his condition, — Pascal, without the knowledge of his master, learned to read, write, and draw up accounts, the faculty for financial calculation developing in him spontaneously with marvellous rapidity. Foreseeing the value of these acquirements, he resolved to conceal them, using them only for his own advantage, and as a dangerous weapon against his master, whom he detested. After mature reflection, Pascal finally thought it his interest to reveal the knowledge he had secretly acquired. The usurer, struck with the ability of the man who was his drudge, then took him as his bookkeeper at a reduced salary, increased his meagre pay by the smallest possible amount, continued to treat him with brutal contempt, vilifying him more than ever that he might not suspect the use that he made of his new services.

Pascal, earnest, indefatigable in work, and eager to further his financial education, continued to submit passively to the outrages heaped upon him, redoubling his servility in proportion as his master redoubled disdain and cruelty.

At the end of a few years thus passed, he felt sufficiently strong to leave the province, and seek a field more worthy of his ability. He entered into a business correspondence with a banker in Paris, to whom he offered his services. The banker had long appreciated Pascal's work, accepted his proposition, and the bookkeeper left the little town, to the great regret of his former master, who tried too late to retain him in his own interests.

The new patron of our hero was at the head of one of those rich houses, morally questionable, but — and it is not unusual — regarded, in a commercial sense, as irreproachable; because, if these houses deal in speculations which sometimes touch upon robbery and fraud, and enrich themselves by ingenious and successful bankruptcy, they, to use their own pretentious words, honour their signature, however dishonourable that signature may be in the opinion of others.

Fervent disciples of that beautiful axiom so universally adopted before the revolution of 1848, — Get rich! — they proudly take their seats in the Chamber of Commerce, heroically assume the name of honourable, and even aim at control of the administration. Why not?

The luxury so much boasted by the old tenants was misery compared to the magnificence of M. Thomas Rousselet.

Pascal, transplanted to this house of absurd and extravagant opulence, suffered humiliations altogether different, but quite as bitter and painful as when he was with the knavish usurer in the province, who, it is true, treated him as a despicable hireling, but had with him in his daily work frequent and familiar relations.

One would seek in vain, among the proudest nobility, the most exclusive aristocracy, anything which could approach the imperious and crushing disdain with which M. and Madame Rousselet treated their subordinates. Shut up in their gloomy offices, from which they saw the sumptuous displays of the Hôtel Rousselet, the persons employed in this house knew only by fairy-like tradition or fabulous legend the gorgeous wonders of these parlours and this dining-room, from which they were absolutely excluded by the dignity of Madame Rousselet, who was as haughty and domineering as the first lady of the chamber to a princess of Lorraine or Rohan.

Although of a new class, these humiliations were not the less galling to Pascal; he now felt more than ever his dependence, his nothingness, and the yoke of the opulent banker chafed him far more than the abuse of the usurer; but our hero, faithful to his plans, hid his wounds, smiled at blows, and licked the varnished boot which sometimes deigned to amuse itself by kicking him, redoubling labour, study, and shrewdness, until he learned the practice of this house, which he considered the perfect pattern of business enterprise, whose motto was:

"Get as much money as possible with the least money possible by all the means possible, carefully protecting yourself from the police and the court."

The margin is a large one, and, as can be easily seen, one can operate there at pleasure.

Thus passed five or six years. The imagination revolts at the accumulation of bitterness, hatred, anger, venom, and malice in the depths of this calculating and vindictive soul, always calm without, like the black and gloomy surface of a poisonous morass.

One day M. Pascal learned the death of his father.

The peddler's savings, considerably increased by skilful financial manipulation, had attained a very high figure. Once possessed of this capital, Pascal swore that he would amass a great fortune by untiring diligence and fortitude, by knowing what to do, and, still more, by knowing how to take; for, argued he, one must risk something, and, if need be, go outside of the straight and narrow path of lawfulness. Our hero kept his oath. He left the house of Rousselet. Ability, chance, fraud, luck, adroitness, and the laws of the time all contributed to his success. He gained important sums, rewarding with cash the friendship of an agent, who, keeping him well informed, put it in his power to handle safely seventy thousand on the Exchange, and lay up almost two millions. A short time afterward an intelligent and adventurous broker, versed in the business of London, helped him to see the possibility of realising immense profit, by boldly engaging in railway speculations, then altogether new in England. Pascal went to London, engaged successfully in an enterprise which soon assumed unheard-of proportions, threw his whole fortune upon one cast of the die, and, realising in time, came back to France with fifteen millions. Then, as cool and prudent as he had been adventurous, and naturally endowed with great financial talent, his only thought was to continually increase this unexpected fortune; he succeeded, availing himself of every opportunity with rare skill, living comfortably, satisfying, at any cost, his numerous sensual desires, but never attracting attention by any exterior display or luxury, and always dining at a public house. In this way he scarcely spent the fifth part of his income, which, furnishing new capital each year, constantly added to the fortune which successful speculation as constantly augmented.

Then, as we have said, came to Pascal his great and terrible day of reprisal.

This soul, hardened by so many years of humiliation and hatred, became implacable, and found a thousand cruel delights in making others feel the weight of the money yoke which he had worn so long.

His keenest suffering had come from the vassalage, the servitude, and complete effacement of self in which he had been held for so long a time under the tyranny of his opulent employers. Now, his pleasure was to impose this servitude on others, — on some, by exercising their natural servility, on others, by compelling them to submit to hard necessity, thus symbolising in himself the almighty power of money, holding all who came within his grasp in absolute slavery, from the petty merchant whom he commanded to the prince of royal blood who humbled himself to obtain a loan. This awful despotism, which the man who lends exercises over the man whose necessities force him to borrow, Pascal wielded and enjoyed with all the refinement and delicacy of an incredible barbarity. We hear often of the power of Satan over souls. M. Pascal was able to destroy or torture as many and more souls than Satan.

Once in his power, through credit, loan, or partnership, — often granted with a show of perfect good-nature, and not unfrequently offered with a duplicity which looked like generosity, though

always on solid security, — a man belonged to himself no longer; he had, as was commonly said, sold his soul to Satan-Pascal.

He calculated and arranged his bargains with a skill which seemed infernal.

A commercial crisis would arrive, — capital not be found, or at such exorbitant interest that merchants, at other times solvent and prompt in payment, saw themselves in extreme embarrassment, often upon the brink of failure. M. Pascal, perfectly instructed and certain of covering his advances by merchandise or property, granted or proposed assistance at enormous interest, with the invariable condition that he was to be reimbursed at his will, hastening to add that he would not exercise his right, inasmuch as his own advantage would be gained by keeping his money at interest; but by habit or caprice, as he argued, he always held to this express condition, to be reimbursed at his will.

The alternative was cruel indeed for the unhappy ones whom Satan-Pascal tempted: on one hand, the ruin of a prosperous industry; on the other, an unexpected aid, so easily offered that it might pass for a generous service. The impossibility of finding capital, even at ruinous rates, and the confidence which M. Pascal knew how to inspire, rendered the temptation most powerful, a temptation all the more seductive by the insinuating kindness of the multi-millionaire, who came, as he declared, as a financial providence to the assistance of honest, labouring people.

In a word, everything conspired to stifle suspicion; they accepted. From that time Pascal possessed them.

Beset by the fear of an immediate demand for repayment which must reduce them to a desperate condition from which they could not hope to rise, they had but one aim, to please M. Pascal, but one dread, to displease M. Pascal, who was master of their fate.

It not infrequently happened that our Satan did not at first use his power, and, by a refinement of wicked malice, would play the part of a kind man, a benefactor, taking a fiendish pleasure in hearing the benedictions with which his victims loaded him, leaving them for a long time in the error which led them to adore their benevolent friend; then, by degrees, according to his humour, he revealed himself slowly, never employing threats, rudeness, or passion, but, on the contrary, affecting an insinuating sweetness which in itself became frightful. Circumstances the most insignificant and puerile offered him a thousand means of tormenting the persons he held in his absolute power.

For instance, he would arrive at the house of one of his vassals, so to speak. Perhaps the man was going with his wife and children to some family reunion, long before arranged.

"I have come to dine with you without ceremony to-day, my friends," this Satan would say.

"My God, M. Pascal! how sorry we are! To-day is my mother's birthday, and you see we are just getting ready to go to dine with her. It is an anniversary we never fail to celebrate."

"Ah! that is very provoking, as I hoped to spend my evening with you."

"And do you think it is less annoying to us, dear M. Pascal?"

"Bah! you could very easily give up a family reunion for me. After all, your mother would not die if you were not there."

"Oh, my dear M. Pascal, that is impossible! It would be the first time since our marriage that we failed in this little family ceremony."

"Come, you surely will do that for me."

"But, M. Pascal — "

"I tell you, you will do that for your good M. Pascal, will you not?"

"We would like to do it with all our heart, but — "

"What! you refuse me that — me — the first thing I have ever asked of you?"

And M. Pascal put such an emphasis on the word *me* that the whole family suddenly trembled; they felt, as is vulgarly said, their master, and knowing of the strange caprice of the capitalist, they submitted sadly rather than offend the dreadful man upon whom their fate depended. They gave up the visit and improvised a dinner. They tried to smile, to have a cheerful air, and not to appear to regret the family festivity which they had renounced. But soon another fear begins to oppress their

hearts; the dinner is becoming more and more sad and constrained. M. Pascal professes a sort of pathetic astonishment, as he complains with a sigh:

"Come, now, I have interfered with your plans; you feel bitterly toward me, alas! I see it."

"Ah, M. Pascal!" cried the unhappy family, more and more disquieted, "how can you conceive such a thought?"

"Oh, I am not mistaken. I see it, I feel it, because my heart tells me so. Eh, my God! just to think of it! It is always a great wrong to put friendship to the proof, even in the smallest things, because they serve sometimes to measure great ones. I, — yes, I, — who counted on you as true and good friends! — yet it was a deception, perhaps."

And Satan-Pascal put his hand over his eyes, got up from the table, and went out of the house with a grieved and afflicted air, leaving the miserable inmates in unspeakable anguish, because he no longer believed in their friendship, and thought them ungrateful, — he who could in one moment plunge them in an abyss of woe by demanding the money he had so generously offered. The gratitude that he expected from them was their only assurance of his continued assistance.

We have insisted on these circumstances, trifling as they may seem perhaps, but whose result was so cruel, because we wished to give an example of how M. Pascal tortured his victims.

Let one judge after that of the degrees of torture to which he was capable of subjecting them, when so insignificant a fact as we have mentioned offered such food to his calculating cruelty.

He was a monster, it must be admitted.

There are Neros, unhappily, everywhere and in every age, but who would dare say that Pascal could have reached such a degree of perversity without the pernicious influences and terrible resentments which his soul, irritated by a degrading servitude, had nourished for so long a time?

The word reprisal does not excuse the cruelty of this man; it explains itself. Man rarely becomes wicked without a cause. Evil owes its birth to evil.

M. Pascal thus portrayed, we will precede him by one hour to the home of M. Charles Dutertre.

CHAPTER V

The factory of M. Dutertre, devoted to the manufacture of locomotives for railroads, occupied an immense site in the Faubourg St. Marceau, and its tall brick chimneys, constantly smoking, designated it at a great distance.

M. Dutertre and his family lived in a small house separated from the workshops by a large garden.

At the moment we introduce the reader into this modest dwelling, an air of festivity reigned there; every one in the house seemed to be occupied with hospitable preparation. A young and active servant had just finished arranging the table in the middle of the dining-room, the window of which looked out upon the garden, and which bordered upon a small kitchen separated from the landing-place by a glass partition, panes set in an unpolished frame. An old cook woman went to and fro with a bewildered air in this culinary laboratory, from which issued whiffs of appetising odours, which sometimes pervaded the dining-room.

In the parlour, furnished with walnut covered in yellow Utrecht velvet and curtains of white muslin, other preparations were going on. Two vases of white porcelain, ornamenting the chimneypiece, had just been filled with fresh flowers; between these two vases, replacing the ornamental clock, was a miniature locomotive under a glass globe, a veritable masterpiece of mechanism and ironmongery. On the black pedestal of this trinket of iron, copper, and steel one could see engraved the words:

To M. Charles Dutertre

His grateful workmen

Téniers or Gérard Dow would have made a charming picture of the family group in this parlour.

A blind old man, with a venerable and melancholy face encircled by long white hair falling over his shoulders, was seated in an armchair, holding two children on his knees, — a little boy of three years old and a little girl of five, — two angels of beauty and grace.

The little boy, dark and rosy, with great black eyes as soft as velvet, every now and then would look at his pretty blue casimir shirt and white trousers with the utmost satisfaction, but was most of all delighted with his white silk stockings striped with crimson, and his black morocco shoes with ribbon bows.

The little girl, named Madeleine for an intimate friend of the mother who was godmother to the child, was fair and rosy, with lovely blue eyes, and wore a pretty white dress. Her shoulders and arms were bare, and her legs were only half covered by dainty Scotch socks. To tell how many dimples were in those shoulders, on those arms, and in those fat little cheeks, so red and fresh and smooth, would have required a mother's computation, and she could only have learned by the number of kisses she gave them.

Standing by and leaning on the back of the old blind man's chair, Madame Dutertre was listening with a mother's interest and earnestness to the chirping of the little warblers that the grandfather held on his knees, talking of this and of that, in that infantine jargon which mothers know how to translate with such rare sagacity.

Madame Sophie Dutertre was only twenty-five years old, and, although slightly marked by smallpox, had unusually regular and beautiful features. It would be difficult to imagine a more gracious or attractive countenance, a more refined or agreeable smile, which was the ideal of

sweetness and amiability. Superb hair, teeth of pearl, a dazzling complexion, and an elegant stature rendered her a charming presence under any circumstances, and when she raised her large, bright, limpid eyes to her husband, who was then standing on the other side of the blind old grandfather, love and maternity gave to this tender glance an expression at the same time pathetic and passionate, for the marriage of Sophie and Charles Dutertre had been a marriage of love.

The only fault — if a fault could be said to pertain to Sophie Dutertre — was, as careful and fastidious as she was about the attire of her children, she gave very little attention to her own toilet. An unbecoming, badly made stuff dress disparaged her elegant figure; her little foot was by no means irreproachably shod, and her beautiful brown hair was arranged with as little taste as care.

Frank and resolute, intelligent and kind, such was the character of M. Dutertre, then about twenty-eight years old. His keen eye, full of fire, and his robust, yet slender figure announced an active, energetic nature. A civil engineer, a man of science and study, as capable of solving difficult problems with the pen as of handling the file and the iron hammer; knowing how to command as well as to execute; honouring and elevating manual labour and sometimes practising it, whether by example or encouragement; scrupulously just; loyal and confiding almost to temerity; paternal, firm and impartial toward his numerous workmen; possessing an antique simplicity of manner; enthusiastic in labour, and in love with his creatures of iron and copper and steel, his life was divided between the three great things which constitute the happiness of man, — love, family, and labour.

Charles Dutertre had only one sorrow, the blindness of his father, and yet this affliction was the opportunity for such tender devotion, such delicate and constant care, that Dutertre and his wife endeavoured to console themselves in the thought that it enabled them to prove to the old man their affection and fidelity. Notwithstanding the preparations for the approaching festivity, Charles Dutertre had postponed shaving until the next day, and his working suit which he kept on showed here and there upon the gray cloth spots and stains and burns which gave evidence of his contact with the forge. His forehead was high and noble-looking, his hands, which were white and nervous, were somewhat blackened by the smoke of the workshops. He seemed to forget, in his laborious and untiring activity, or in the refreshing repose which succeeded it, that personal care which some men very properly never renounce.

Such were the persons assembled in the modest parlour of the little home. The two children, chatting incessantly and at the same time, tried to make themselves understood by their grandfather, who responded with the best will in the world, and, smiling sweetly, would ask them:

"What did you say, my little Augustus, and what do you say, my little Madeleine?"

"Will madame the interpreter have the kindness to translate this pretty chirping into common language?" said Charles Dutertre to his wife, as he laughed merrily.

"Why, Charles, do you not understand?"

"Not at all."

"Do you not understand the children, father?" said she to the old man.

"I thought I heard something about Sunday dress," said the old man, smiling, "but it was so complicated that I gave up all hope of comprehending it."

"It was something very like that, — come, come, only mothers and grandfathers understand little children," said Sophie, triumphantly.

Then turning to the children, she said:

"My dears, did you not say to your grandfather, 'To-day is Sunday because we have on our pretty new clothes'?"

The little blonde Madeleine opened her great blue eyes wide, and bowed her curly head in the affirmative.

"You are the Champollion of mothers!" cried Charles Dutertre, while the old man said to the two children:

"No, to-day is not Sunday, my children, but it is a feast-day."

Here Sophie was obliged to interfere again, and translate.

"They ask why it is a feast-day, father."

"Because we are going to have a friend visit us, and when a friend comes to see us, it is always a feast," replied the old man, with a smile somewhat constrained.

"Ah, we must not forget the purse," said Dutertre to his wife.

"Wait a moment," replied Sophie, gaily, to her husband, as she pointed to a little rose-coloured box on the table, "do you think that I, any more than you, could forget our good M. Pascal, our worthy benefactor?"

The grandfather, turning to little Madeleine, said, as he kissed her brow:

"We are expecting M. Pascal, — you know M. Pascal."

Madeleine again opened her great blue eyes; her face took on an expression almost of fear, and shaking her little curly head sadly, she said:

"He is bad."

"M. Pascal?" said Sophie.

"Oh, yes, very bad!" replied the child.

"But," said the young mother, "my dear Madeleine, why do you think that M. Pascal is bad?"

"Come, Sophie," said Charles Dutertre, smiling, "you are not going to stop to listen to this childish talk about our worthy friend, are you?"

Strange enough, the old man's countenance at once assumed a vague expression of disquietude, and whether he trusted the instinct and penetration of children, or whether he was influenced by another thought, far from making a jest of Madeleine's words, as his son did, he leaned over the child, and said:

"Tell us, my child, why M. Pascal is bad."

The little blonde shook her head, and said, innocently:

"Don't know, — but, very sure, he is bad."

Sophie, who felt a good deal like the grandfather on the subject of the wonderful sagacity of children, could not overcome a slight feeling of alarm, for there are secret, mysterious relations between a mother and the children of her blood. An indefinable presentiment, against which Sophie struggled with all her strength, because she thought it absurd and foolish, told her that the little girl had made no mistake in reading the character of M. Pascal, although she had heretofore esteemed him as the impersonation of goodness and generosity.

Charles Dutertre, never suspecting the impressions of his wife and father, replied, smiling:

"Now it is my turn to give a lesson to this grandfather and this mother, who pretend to understand the prattle and feeling of children so well. Our excellent friend has a rough exterior, heavy eyebrows, and a black beard and dark skin and unprepossessing speech; he is, in a word, a sort of benevolent churl, but he does not deserve the name of bad, even upon the authority of this little blonde."

At this moment the servant entered, and said to her mistress:

"Madame, Mlle. Hubert is here with her maid, and — "

"Antonine? What good fortune!" said Sophie, rising immediately, and going to meet the young girl.

"Madame," added the servant, mysteriously, "Agatha wants to know if M. Pascal likes his peas with sugar or bacon?"

"Charles!" called Sophie, merrily, to her husband, "this is a grave question, what do you think of it?"

"Make one dish of peas with sugar, and the other with bacon," replied Charles, thoughtfully.

"It takes mathematicians to solve problems," replied Sophie, then, taking her children by the hand, she added: "I want Antonine to see how large and pretty they are."

"But I hope you will persuade Mlle. Hubert to come in, or I must go after her."

"I am going to take the children to their nurse, and I will return with Antonine."

"Charles," said the old man, rising, when the young woman had disappeared, "give me your arm, please."

"Certainly, father; but M. Pascal will arrive before long."

"And you insist upon my being present, my son?"

"You know, father, all the respect that our friend has for you, and how glad he is to show it to you."

After a moment's silence, the old man replied:

"Do you know that, since you have dismissed your old cashier, Marcelange, he often visits M. Pascal?"

"This is the first time I have heard it."

"Does it not seem singular to you?"

"Yes, indeed."

"Listen to me, Charles, I — "

"I beg your pardon, father," replied Dutertre, interrupting the old man, "now I think of it, nothing is more natural; I have not seen our friend since I sent Marcelange away; Marcelange knows of our friendship for M. Pascal, and he perhaps has gone to see him, to beg him to intercede with me for him."

"It can be so explained," said the old man, thoughtfully. "Yet — "

"Well, father?"

"Your little girl's impression struck me forcibly."

"Come, father," replied Dutertre, smiling, "you say that to compliment my wife. Unfortunately, she is not present to hear you. But I will report your gallantry to her."

"I say so, Charles," replied the old man, in a solemn tone, "because, as childish as it may appear, your little girl's impression seems to me to have a certain weight, and when I recall some other circumstances, and think of the frequent interviews between Marcelange and M. Pascal, I confess to you that I feel in spite of myself a vague distrust of your friend."

"Oh, father, father," replied Charles Dutertre, with emotion, "of course you do not mean it, but you distress me very much. Doubt our generous benefactor, M. Pascal! Ah, banish your suspicions, father, for this is the first sorrow I have felt in a long time. To suspect without proof, to be influenced by the passing impression of a little child," added Dutertre, with all the warmth of his natural generosity, "that is unjust, indeed!"

"Charles!" said the old man, wounded by his son's resentment.

"Oh, pardon me, pardon me, father," cried Dutertre, taking the old man's hands in his own, "I was too quick, forgive me; for a moment friendship spoke louder than my respect for you."

"My poor Charles," replied the old man, affectionately, "Heaven grant that you may be right in differing from me, and, far from complaining of your readiness to defend a friend, I am glad of it. But I hear some one coming, — take me back to my room."

At the moment M. Dutertre closed the door of the chamber where he had conducted the blind man, Mlle. Hubert entered the parlour accompanied by Madame Dutertre.

CHAPTER VI

Notwithstanding the triteness of the mythological comparison, we must be pardoned for saying that never Hebe, the cupbearer to the gods of Olympus, in all the brilliancy of her superhuman beauty, united in herself more resplendent charms than did, in her terrestrial loveliness, the modest maiden, Antonine Hubert, whose love secret with Frantz M. Pascal had surprised.

What seemed most attractive in this young girl was the beauty of fifteen years and a half which combined the grace and freshness of the child with the budding charms of young womanhood, — enchanting age, still full of mysteries and chaste ignorances, a pure dawn, white and transparent, that the first palpitations of an innocent love would colour with the exquisite tint of the full-blown rose.

Such was the age of Antonine, and she had the charm and all the charms of that age.

To humanise our Hebe, we will make her descend from her pedestal, and, veiling her delicate and beautiful form, will clothe her in an elegant summer robe; a black silk mantle will hide the exquisite contour of her bust, and a straw hat, lined with silk as rosy as her cheeks, allowing us a view of her chestnut tresses, will serve as a frame for the oval face, as fresh, as fair, and as soft as that of the child she has just embraced.

As she entered the parlour with Sophie, mademoiselle blushed slightly, for she had the timidity of her fifteen years; then, put at ease by the cordial reception of Dutertre and his wife, she said to the latter, with a sort of deference drawn from their old relations of child and mother, as they were called in the boarding-school where they had been brought up together:

"You do not know the good fortune which brings me here, Sophie."

"A good fortune! — so much the better, my little Antonine!"

"A letter from St. Madeleine," replied the young girl, drawing an envelope from her pocket.

"Really!" exclaimed Sophie, blushing with joy and surprise, as she reached her hand impatiently for the letter.

"What, Mlle. Antonine," said Charles Dutertre, laughing, "you are in correspondence with paradise? Though if it is true I ought not to be astonished, inasmuch — "

"Be silent, M. Tease," interrupted Sophie, "and do not make jokes about Antonine's and my best friend."

"I will be careful, — but what is the meaning of this name, St. Madeleine?"

"Why, Charles, have I not told you a thousand times about my school friend, Madeleine Silveyra, who is godmother by proxy of our little one? What are you thinking of?"

"I have a very good memory, my dear Sophie," replied Dutertre, "because I have not forgotten that this young Mexican had such a singular kind of beauty that she inspired as much surprise as admiration."

"The very same lady, my dear; after me, Madeleine acted as a mother to Antonine, as we said at school, where each large girl had the care of a child from ten to eleven years old; so, when I left school, I confided dear Antonine to the affection of St. Madeleine."

"It is just that surname which was the cause of my mistake," replied Dutertre, "a surname which seems to me very ambitious or very humble for such a pretty person, for she must be near your age."

"They gave Madeleine the name of saint at school because she deserved it, M. Dutertre," replied Antonine, with all the seriousness of fifteen years, "and while she was my little mother they continued to call her St. Madeleine, as they did in Sophie's time."

"Was this Mlle. St. Madeleine a very austere devotee?" asked Dutertre.

"Madeleine, like all people of her country, — we gave our French form to her name of Magdalena, — gave herself to a particular devotion. She had chosen the Christ, and her adoration for her Saviour became an ecstasy," replied Sophie; "besides, she united to this enthusiastic devotion the warmest heart and the most interesting, enjoyable mind in the world. But I pray you, Charles,

let me read her letter. I am impatient. Just imagine, the first letter after two years of separation! Antonine and I felt a little bitter at her silence, but you see the first remembrance we receive from her disarms us."

And taking the letter which Antonine had just given her, Sophie read, with an emotion which increased with every line.

"Dear Madeleine, always tender and affectionate, always witty and bright, always so appreciative of any remembrance of the past. After a few days' rest at Marseilles, where she has arrived from Venice, she comes to Paris, almost at the same time her letter arrives, and she thinks only of the happiness of seeing Sophie, her friend, and her little girl Antonine, and she writes in haste to both of us, and signs herself as of old, St. Madeleine."

"Then she is not married?" asked Charles Dutertre.

"I do not know, my dear," replied his wife, "she signs only her baptismal name."

"But why should I ask such an absurd question? — think of a married saint!"

At that moment the servant entered, and, stopping on the threshold of the door, made a significant sign to her mistress, who replied:

"You can speak, Julie, Mlle. Antonine is a part of the family."

"Madame," said the servant, "Agatha wants to know if she must put the chicken on the spit if M. Pascal does not come?"

"Certainly," said Madame Dutertre, "M. Pascal is a little late, but we expect him every minute."

"You are expecting some one, then, Sophie?" asked Antonine, when the servant retired. "Well, good-bye, I will see you again," added the young girl, with a sigh. "I did not come only to bring St. Madeleine's letter, I wanted to have a long chat with you. I will see you again to-morrow, dear Sophie."

"Not at all, my little Antonine. I use my authority as mother to keep my dear little girl and have her breakfast with us. It is a sort of family feast. Is it because your place was not ready, my child?"

"Come, Mlle. Antonine," said Charles, "do us the kindness to stay."

"You are a thousand times too good, M. Dutertre, but, really, I cannot accept."

"Then," replied he, "I am going to employ the greatest means of seducing you; in a word, if you will stay, you shall see the generous man who, of his own accord, came to our rescue this day a year ago, for this is the anniversary of that noble action that we are celebrating to-day."

Sophie, having forgotten the presentiment awakened in her mind by the words of her little girl, added:

"Yes, my little Antonine, at the very moment, the critical moment, when ruin threatened our business, M. Pascal said to Charles: 'Monsieur, I do not know you personally, but I know you are as just as you are laborious and intelligent; you need fifty thousand to put your business in a good condition. I offer it to you as a friend, accept it as a friend; as to interest, we will estimate that afterward, and still as a friend.'"

"That was to act nobly, indeed!" said Antonine.

"Yes," said Charles Dutertre, with profound emotion, "for it is not only my industry which he has saved, but it was the labour of the numerous workmen I employ, it was the repose of my father's old age, the happiness of my wife, the future of my children. Oh, stay with us, stay, Mlle. Antonine, the sight of such a good man is so rare, so sweet — But wait, there he is!" exclaimed M. Dutertre, as he saw M. Pascal pass the parlour window.

"I am much impressed with all Sophie and you have told me, M. Dutertre, and I regret I cannot see this generous man to whom you owe so much, but breakfast would detain me too long. I must return early. My uncle expects me, and he has passed a very painful night; in these attacks of suffering he always wants me near him, and these attacks come at any time."

Then, taking Sophie by the hand, the young girl added:

"Can I see you again soon?"

"To-morrow or day after, my dear little Antonine, I am coming to see you, and we will talk as long as you like."

The door opened; M. Pascal entered.

Antonine embraced her friend, and Sophie said to the financier, with affectionate cordiality:

"Permit me, will you not, M. Pascal, to take leave of mademoiselle. I need not say that I will hasten to return."

"No need of ceremony, my dear Madame Dutertre," stammered M. Pascal, in spite of his assurance astonished to see Antonine again, and he followed her with an intense, surly gaze until she had left the room.

CHAPTER VII

M. Pascal, at the sight of Antonine, whom he saw for the second time that morning, was, as we have said, a moment bewildered with surprise and admiration before this fresh and innocent beauty.

"At last, here you are!" said Charles Dutertre, effusively extending both hands to M. Pascal when he found himself alone with him. "Do you know we were beginning to question your promptness? All the week my wife and I have looked forward with joy to this day, for, after the anniversary of the birth of our children, the day that we celebrate with the most pleasure is the one from which dates, thanks to you, the security of their future. It is so good, so sweet to feel, by the gratitude of our hearts, the lofty nobleness of those generous deeds which honour him who offers as much as him who accepts."

M. Pascal did not appear to have heard the words of M. Dutertre, and said to him:

"Who is that young girl who just went out of here?"

"Mlle. Antonine Hubert."

"Is she related to President Hubert, who has lately been so ill?"

"She is his niece."

"Ah!" said Pascal, thoughtfully.

"You know if my father were not with us," replied M. Dutertre, smiling, "our little festivity would not be complete. I am going to inform him of your arrival, my dear M. Pascal."

And as he stepped to the door of the old man's chamber, M. Pascal stopped him with a gesture, and said:

"Does not President Hubert reside — "

And as he hesitated, Dutertre added:

"In Faubourg St. Honoré. The garden joins that of the Élysée-Bourbon."

"Has this young girl lived with her uncle long?"

Dutertre, quite surprised at this persistent inquiry concerning Antonine, answered:

"About three months ago M. Hubert went to Nice for Antonine, where she lived after the death of her parents."

"And is Madame Dutertre very intimate with this young person?"

"They were together at boarding-school, where Sophie was a sort of mother to her, and ever since they have been upon the most affectionate terms."

"Ah!" said Pascal, again relapsing into deep thought.

This man possessed a great and rare faculty which had contributed to the accumulation of his immense fortune, — he could with perfect ease detach himself from any line of thought, and enter upon a totally different set of ideas. Thus, after the interview of Frantz and Antonine which he had surprised, and which had excited him so profoundly, he was able to talk with the archduke upon business affairs, and to torture him with deliberate malice.

In the same way, after this meeting with Antonine at the house of Dutertre, he postponed, so to speak, his violent resentment and his plans regarding the young girl, and said, with perfect good-nature, to Sophie's husband:

"While we wait for the return of your wife, I have a little favour to ask of you."

"At last!" exclaimed Dutertre, rubbing his hands with evident satisfaction; "better late than never."

"You had a cashier named Marcelange?"

"Yes, unfortunately."

"Unfortunately?"

"He committed, while in my employ, not an act of dishonesty, for I should not, at any price, have saved him from the punishment he merited; but he was guilty of an indelicacy under circumstances which proved to me that the man was a wretch, and I dismissed him."

"Marcelange told me, in fact, that you sent him away."

"You are acquainted with him?" replied Dutertre, in surprise, as he recalled his father's words.

"Some days ago he came to see me. He wished to get a position in the Durand house."

"He? Among such honourable people?"

"Why not? He was employed by you."

"But, as I have told you, my dear M. Pascal, I sent him away as soon as his conduct was known to me."

"I understand perfectly. Only, as he is without a position, he must have, in order to enter the Durand house, a letter of recommendation from you, as the Durands are not willing to accept the poor fellow otherwise; now this letter, my dear Dutertre, I come honestly to ask of you."

After a moment of astonishment, Dutertre said, with a smile:

"After all, I ought not to be astonished. You are so kind! This man is full of artifice and falsity, and knows how to take advantage of your confidence."

"I believe, really, that Marcelange is very false, very sly; but that need not prevent your giving me the letter I ask."

Dutertre could not believe that he had heard aright, or that he understood M. Pascal, and replied:

"I beg your pardon, sir. I have just told you that — "

"You have reason to complain of an act of indelicacy on the part of this fellow, but, bah! what does that matter?"

"What! M. Pascal, you ask, what does it matter? Know then, that, in my eyes, this man's act was even more blamable than fraud in money matters."

"I believe you, my dear Dutertre, I believe you; there is no better judge of honourable dealing than yourself. Marcelange seems to me truly a cunning rascal, and, if I must tell you, it is on that account that I insist — insist very much on his being recommended by you."

"Honestly, M. Pascal, I believe that I should be acting a dishonourable part in aiding the entrance of Marcelange into a thoroughly respectable house."

"Come, now, do this for me!"

"You are not speaking seriously, M. Pascal?"

"I am speaking very seriously."

"After what I have just confided to you?"

"My God! yes, why not?"

"You! you! honour and loyalty itself!"

"I, the impersonation of honour and loyalty, ask you to give me this letter."

Dutertre looked at M. Pascal, bewildered; then, after a moment's reflection, he replied, in a tone of affectionate reproach:

"Ah, sir, after a year has elapsed, was this proof necessary?"

"What proof?"

"To propose an unworthy action to me, that you might feel assured that I deserved your confidence."

"My dear Dutertre, I repeat to you that I must have this letter. It concerns an affair which is very important to me."

M. Pascal was speaking seriously. Dutertre could no longer doubt it. He then remembered the words of his father, the antipathy of his little girl, and, seized with a vague dread, he replied, in a constrained voice:

"So, monsieur, you forget the grave responsibility which would rest upon me if I did what you desire."

"Eh, my God! my brave Dutertre, if we only asked easy things of our friends!"

"You ask of me an impossible thing, monsieur."

"So, then, you refuse to do it for me, do you?"

"M. Pascal," said Dutertre, with an accent at the same time firm and full of emotion, "I owe you everything. There is not a day that I, my wife, and my father do not recall the fact that, one year ago, without your unexpected succour, our own ruin, and the ruin of many other people, would have been inevitable. All that gratitude can inspire of respect and affection we feel for you. Every possible proof of devotion we are ready to give you with pleasure, with happiness, but — "

"One word more, and you will understand me," interrupted M. Pascal. "Since I must tell you, Dutertre, I have a special interest in having some one who belongs to me — entirely to me, you understand, entirely mine — in the business house of Durand. Now, you can comprehend that, holding Marcelange by this letter which you will give me for him, and by what I know of his antecedents, I can make him my creature, my blind instrument. This is entirely between us, my dear Dutertre, and, counting on your absolute discretion, I will go further even, and I will tell you that — "

"Not a word more on this subject, sir, I beg," exclaimed Dutertre, with increasing surprise and distress, for up to that time he had believed Pascal to be a man of incorruptible integrity. "Not a word more. There are secrets whose confidence one does not wish to accept."

"Why?"

"Because they might become very embarrassing, sir."

"Really! The confidences of an old friend can become an annoyance! Very well, I will keep them. Then, give me this letter without any more explanations."

"I repeat to you, sir, that it is impossible for me to do so."

M. Pascal bit his lips and unconsciously knit his eyebrows; as surprised as he was angry at the refusal of Dutertre, he could scarcely believe that a man who was dependent upon him could have the audacity to oppose his will, or the courage to sacrifice the present and the future to a scruple of honour.

However, as he had a special interest in this letter, he replied, with a tone of affectionate reproach:

"What! You refuse me that, my dear Dutertre, — refuse me, your friend?"

"I refuse you above all, — you who have had faith enough in my incorruptible honesty to advance for me, without even knowing me, a considerable amount."

"Come, my dear Dutertre, do not make me more adventurous than I am. Are not your honesty, your intelligence, your interest even, and at any rate the material in your factory, sufficient security for my capital? Am I not always in a safe position, by the right I reserve to myself, to exact repayment at will? A right which I will not exercise in your case for a long time, as I know. I am too much interested in you to do that, Dutertre," as he saw astonishment and anguish depicted in Dutertre's face, "but, indeed, let us suppose, — oh, it will not come to that, thank God, — but let us suppose that, in the constrained condition and trying crisis in which business is at present, I should say to you to-day, M. Dutertre, I shall need my money in a month, and I withdraw my credit from you."

"Great God!" exclaimed Dutertre, terrified, staggered at the bare supposition of such a disaster, "I would go into bankruptcy! It would be my ruin, the loss of my business; I would be obliged, perhaps, to work with my own hands, if I could find employment, to support my infirm father, my wife, and my children."

"Will you be silent, you wicked man, and not put such painful things before my eyes! You are going to spoil my whole day!" exclaimed M. Pascal, with irresistible good-nature, taking Dutertre's hands in his own. "Do you speak in this way, when I, like you, am making a festivity of this morning? Well, well, what is the matter? How pale you look, now!"

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Dutertre, wiping the drops of cold sweat from his brow, "but at the very thought of such an unexpected blow which would strike all that I hold dearest in the world,

my honour, my family, my labour — Ah, yes, monsieur, you are right, let us drive this thought far from us, it is too horrible."

"Eh! my God, that is just what I was saying to you; do not let us make this charming day a sad one. So, to finish the matter," added M. Pascal, cheerfully, "let us hurry over business affairs, let us empty our bag, as the saying is. Give me this letter, and we will talk no more about it."

Dutertre started, a frightful pain wrung his heart, and he replied:

"Such persistence astonishes and distresses me, monsieur. I repeat to you it is absolutely impossible for me to do what you ask."

"What a child you are! my persistent request proves to you how much importance I attach to this affair."

"That may be, monsieur."

"And why do I attach such importance to it, my brave Dutertre? It is because this matter interests you as well as myself."

"What do you mean, monsieur?"

"Eh! without doubt. My combination with the house of Durand failing, since your refusal would prevent my employing this knave Marcelange, as I desire (you do not wish to know my secrets, so I am forced to keep them), perhaps I should be compelled for certain reasons," added M. Pascal, pronouncing his words slowly, and looking at his victim with a sharp, cold eye, "I say, perhaps I should be compelled — and it would draw the blood from my heart — to demand the repayment of my capital, and withdraw my credit from you."

"Oh, my God!" exclaimed Dutertre, clasping his hands and looking as pale as a ghost.

"So you see, bad man, in what an atrocious position you put yourself. Force me to an action which, I repeat to you, would tear my soul — "

"But, monsieur, a moment ago you assured me that — "

"Zounds! my intention would be to let you keep this wretched capital as long as possible. You pay me the interest with remarkable punctuality, it was perfectly well placed, and, thanks to our terms of liquidation, you would have been free in ten years, and I should have made a good investment in doing you a service."

"Really, monsieur," murmured Dutertre, overwhelmed, "such were your promises, if not written, at least verbal, and the generosity of your offer, the loyalty of your character, all gave me perfect confidence. God grant that I may not have to consider myself the most rash, the most stupid man, to have trusted your word!"

"As to that, Dutertre, you can be at peace with yourself; at that period of commercial crisis, at least as terrible as it is to-day, you could not have found anywhere the capital that I offered you at such a moderate rate."

"I know it, monsieur."

"Then you can, and you must, indeed, by sheer force of necessity, accept the condition I put upon this loan."

"But, monsieur," cried Dutertre, with inexpressible alarm, "I appeal to your honour! You have expressly promised me that — "

"Eh, my God, yes, I promised you, saving the superior force of events; and unfortunately your refusal to give this poor little letter creates an event of stronger force which places me in the painful — the grievous necessity of asking you for repayment of my money."

"But, monsieur, it is an unworthy action that you ask me to do, think of it."

At this moment was heard the sweet ringing laughter of Sophie, who was approaching the parlour.

"Ah, monsieur," said her husband, "not a word of this before my wife, because it may not be your final resolve. I hope that — "

Charles Dutertre could not finish, because Sophie had entered the parlour.

The unhappy man could only make a supplicating gesture to Pascal, who responded to it by a sign of sympathetic intelligence.

CHAPTER VIII

When Sophie Dutertre entered the parlour, where were seated her husband and M. Pascal, the gracious countenance of the young woman, more flushed than usual, the light throbbing of her bosom, and her moist eyes, all testified to a recent fit of hilarious laughter.

"Ah, ah, Madame Dutertre!" said M. Pascal, cheerfully. "I heard you distinctly; you were laughing like a lunatic."

Then, turning to Dutertre, who was trying to hide his intense distress and to hold on to a last hope, he said:

"How gay happiness makes these young women! Nothing like the sight of them puts joy in the heart, does it, my brave Dutertre?"

"I was laughing in spite of myself, I assure you, my dear M. Pascal," replied Sophie.

"In spite of yourself?" answered our hero. "Why, does some sorrow — "

"Sorrow? Oh, no, thank God! But I was more disposed to tenderness than gaiety. This dear Antonine, if you only knew her, Charles," added the young woman, with sweet emotion, addressing her husband. "I cannot tell you how she has moved me, what a pure, touching confession she has made to me, for the heart of the poor child was too full, and she could not go away without telling me all."

And a tear of sympathy moistened Sophie's beautiful eyes.

At the name of Antonine, M. Pascal, notwithstanding his great control over himself, started. His thoughts concerning this young girl, for a moment postponed, returned more ardent, more persistent than ever, and as Sophie was wiping her eyes he threw upon her a penetrating glance, trying to divine what he might hope from her, in reference to the plan he meditated.

Sophie soon spoke, addressing her husband:

"But, Charles, — I will relate it all to you, after awhile, — while I was absorbed in thinking of my interview with Antonine, my little Madeleine came to me, and said in her baby language such ridiculous things that I could not keep from bursting into laughter. But, pardon me, M. Pascal, your heart will understand and excuse, I know, all a mother's weakness."

"Do you say that to me," replied Pascal, cordially, "a bachelor, — you say it to me, a good old fellow?"

"That is true," added Sophie, affectionately, "but we love you so much here, you see, that we think you are right to call yourself a good old fellow. Ask Charles if he will contradict my words."

Dutertre replied with a constrained smile, and he had the strength and the courage to restrain his feelings before his wife to such a degree that she, occupied with M. Pascal, had not the least suspicion of her husband's anxiety. So, going to the table and taking up the purse she had embroidered, she presented it to M. Pascal, and said to him, in a voice full of emotion:

"My dear M. Pascal, this purse is the fruit of my evening work, — evenings that I have spent here with my husband, with his excellent father, and with my children. If each one of these little steel beads could speak, all would tell you how many times your name has been pronounced among us, with all the affection and gratitude it deserves."

"Ah, thank you, thank you, my dear Madame Dutertre," replied Pascal, "I cannot tell you how much I appreciate this pretty present, this lovely remembrance, — only, you see, it embarrasses me a little."

"How is that?"

"You come to give me something, and I came to ask you something."

"What happiness! Ask, ask, by all means, dear M. Pascal."

Then turning to her husband, with surprise, she said:

"Charles, what are you doing there, seated before that desk?"

"M. Pascal will excuse me. I just recollected that I had neglected to examine some notes relative to important business," replied Dutertre, turning the leaves of some papers, to keep himself in countenance, and to hide from his wife, to whom he had turned his back, the pain which showed itself in his face.

"My dear," said Sophie, in a tone of tender reproach; "can you not lay aside work now and wait until — "

"Madame Dutertre, I shall rebel if you disturb your husband on my account," cried M. Pascal, "do I not know the exactness of business? Come, come, happy woman that you are, thanks to the indefatigable labour of brave Dutertre, who stands to-day at the head of his business."

"And who has encouraged him in his zeal for work, but you, M. Pascal? If Charles is as you say at the head of his industry, if our future and that of our children is ever assured, do we not owe it to you?"

"My dear Madame Dutertre, you confuse me so that I shall not know how to ask the little service I expect from you."

"Oh, I forgot it," replied Sophie, smiling, "but we were speaking of more important services that you have rendered us, were we not? But tell us quick, quick, — what is it?" said the young woman, with an eagerness which gave her an additional charm.

"What I am going to tell you will surprise you, perhaps?"

"So much the better, I adore surprises."

"Ah, well, the isolation of bachelor life weighs upon me, and — "

"And?"

"I wish to get married."

"Truly!"

"Does it astonish you? I am sure it does."

"You are entirely mistaken, for in my opinion you ought to get married."

"Pray, why?"

"How often I have said to myself, sooner or later this good M. Pascal, who lives so much by his heart, will enjoy the sweets of family life, and, if I must confess my vain presumption," added Sophie, "I said to myself, it is impossible that the sight of the happiness Charles and I enjoy should not some day suggest the idea of marriage to M. Pascal. Now, was I not happy in foreseeing your intention?"

"Have your triumph, then, dear Madame Dutertre, because, in fact, seduced by your example and that of your husband, I desire to make, as you two did, a marriage of love."

"Can any other marriage be possible?" replied Sophie, shrugging her shoulders with a most graceful movement, and, without reflecting upon the thirty-eight years of M. Pascal, she added:

"And you are loved?"

"My God, that depends on you."

"On me?"

"Absolutely."

"On me?" exclaimed Sophie, with increasing surprise. "Do you hear, Charles, what M. Pascal says."

"I hear," replied Dutertre, who, not less astonished than his wife, was listening with involuntary anxiety.

"How can I, M. Pascal, how can I make you loved?" asked Sophie.

"You can do so, my dear Madame Dutertre."

"Although it seems incomprehensible to me, bless God for it. If I have the magic power you attribute to me, my dear M. Pascal," replied Sophie, with her sweetest smile, "then you will be loved, as you deserve to be."

"Counting on your promise, then, I will not travel four roads, but confess at once, my dear Madame Dutertre, that I am in love with Mlle. Antonine Hubert."

"Antonine!" exclaimed Sophie, astounded; while Dutertre, seated before his desk, turned abruptly to his wife, whose astonishment he shared.

"Antonine!" replied Sophie, as if she could not believe what she had heard. "You love Antonine!"

"Yes, it is she. I met her to-day in your house, for the fourth time, only I have never spoken to her. However, my mind is made up, for I am one of those people who decide quickly and by instinct. For instance, when it was necessary for me to come to the aid of this brave Dutertre, the thing was done in two hours. Well, the ravishing beauty of Mlle. Antonine, the purity of her face, a something, I know not what, tells me that this young person has the best qualities in the world, — all has contributed to render me madly in love with her, and to desire in a marriage of love, like yours, my dear Madame Dutertre, that inward happiness, those joys of the heart, that you believe me worthy of knowing and enjoying."

"Monsieur," said Sophie, with painful embarrassment, "permit me — "

"One word more, it is love at first sight, you will say, — that may be, but there are twenty examples of love as sudden as they are deep. Besides, as I have told you, I am plainly a man of instinct, of presentiment; with a single glance of the eye, I have always judged a thing good or bad. Why should I not follow in marriage a method which has always perfectly succeeded with me? I have told you that it depends entirely on you to make Mlle. Antonine love me. I will explain. At fifteen years, and she seems hardly to be so old as that, young girls have no wills of their own. You have acted as mother to Mlle. Antonine, as Dutertre has told me; you possess great influence over her, nothing would be more easy, by talking to her of me in a certain manner, when you shall have presented me to her, and that can be not later than to-morrow, can it not? I repeat, it will be easy for you to induce her to share my love, and to marry me. If I owe you this happiness, my dear Madame Dutertre, wait and see," added Pascal, with a tone full of emotion and sincerity. "You speak of gratitude? Well, that which you have toward me would be ingratitude, compared with what I would feel toward you!"

Sophie had listened to M. Pascal with as much grief as surprise; for she believed, and she had reason to believe, in the reality of the love, or rather the ardent desire for possession that this man felt; so she replied, with deep feeling, for it cost her much to disappoint hopes which seemed to her honourable:

"My poor M. Pascal, you must see that I am distressed not to be able to render you the first service you ask of me. I need not tell you how deeply I regret it."

"What is impossible in it?"

"Believe me, do not think of this marriage."

"Does not Mlle. Antonine deserve — "

"Antonine is an angel. I have known her from infancy. There is not a better heart, a better character, in the world."

"What you tell me, my dear Madame Dutertre, would suffice to augment my desire, if that could be done."

"I say again, this marriage is impossible."

"Well, tell me why."

"In the first place, think of it, Antonine is only fifteen and a half, and you — "

"I am thirty-eight. Is it that?"

"The difference of age is very great, you must confess, and as I would not advise my daughter or my sister to make a marriage so disproportionate, I cannot advise Antonine to do so, because I would not at any price make your unhappiness or hers."

"Oh, make yourself easy! I will answer for my own happiness."

"And that of Antonine?"

"Bah! bah! for a few years, more or less — "

"I married for love, my dear M. Pascal. I do not comprehend other marriages. Perhaps it is wrong, but indeed I think so, and I ought to tell you so, since you consult me."

"According to you, then, I am not capable of pleasing Mlle. Antonine?"

"I believe that, like Charles and myself, and like all generous hearts, she would appreciate the nobility of your character, but — "

"Permit me again, my dear Madame Dutertre, — a child of fifteen years has no settled ideas on the subject of marriage; and Mlle. Antonine has a blind confidence in you. Present me to her; tell her all sorts of good about the good man, Pascal. The affair is sure, — if you wish to do it, you can."

"Hear me, my dear M. Pascal, this conversation grieves me more than I can tell you, and to put an end to it I will trust a secret to your discretion and your loyalty."

"Very well, what is this secret?"

"Antonine loves, and is loved. Ah, M. Pascal, nothing could be purer or more affecting than this love, and, for many reasons, I am certain it will assure Antonine's happiness. Her uncle's health is precarious, and should the poor child lose him she would be obliged to live with relatives who, not without reason, inspire her with aversion. Once married according to the dictate of her heart, she can hope for a happy future, for her warm affection is nobly placed. You must see, then, my dear M. Pascal, that, even with my influence, you would have no chance of success, and how can I give you my influence, with the approval of my conscience, leaving out of consideration the disparity of age, which, in my opinion, is an insuperable objection? I am sure, and I do not speak lightly, that the love which Antonine both feels and inspires ought to make her happy throughout her life."

At this confirmation of Antonine's love for Frantz, a secret already half understood by M. Pascal, he was filled with rage and resentment, which was all the more violent for reason of the refusal of Madame Dutertre, who declined to enter into his impossible plans; but he restrained himself with a view of attempting a last effort. Failing in that, he resolved to take a terrible revenge. So, with apparent calmness, he replied:

"Ah, so Mlle. Antonine is in love! Well, so be it; but we know, my dear Madame Dutertre, what these grand passions of young girls are, — a straw fire. You can blow it out; this beautiful love could not resist your influence."

"I assure you, M. Pascal, I would not try to influence Antonine upon this subject, for it would be useless."

"You think so?"

"I am certain of it."

"Bah! it is always worth while to try."

"But I tell you, sir, that Antonine — "

"Is in love! I understand, and more, the good old bachelor Pascal is thirty-eight, and evidently not handsome, but on the other hand he has some handsome little millions, and when this evening (for you will see her this evening, will you not? I count on it) you make this unsophisticated maiden comprehend that, if love is a good thing, money is still better, for love passes and money stays, she will follow your counsel, dismiss her lover to-morrow, and I will have no more to say but 'Glory and thanks to you, my dear Madame Dutertre!'"

Sophie stared at M. Pascal in amazement. Her womanly sensitivity was deeply shocked, and her instinct told her that a man who could talk as M. Pascal had done was not the man of good feeling and rectitude that she had believed him to be.

At this moment, too, Dutertre rose from his chair, showing in his countenance the perplexity which agitated his mind; for the first time, his wife observed the alteration of his expression, and exclaimed as she advanced to meet him:

"My God! Charles, how pale you are! Are you in pain?"

"No, Sophie, nothing is the matter with me, — only a slight headache."

"But I tell you something else is the matter. This pallor is not natural. Oh, M. Pascal, do look at Charles!"

"Really, my good Dutertre, you do not appear at your ease."

"Nothing is the matter, sir," replied Dutertre, with an icy tone which increased Sophie's undefined fear.

She looked in silence, first at her husband, and then at M. Pascal, trying to discern the cause of the change that she saw and feared.

"Well, my dear Dutertre," said M. Pascal, "you have heard our conversation; pray join me in trying to make your dear and excellent wife comprehend that mademoiselle, notwithstanding her foolish, childish love, could not find a better party than myself."

"I share my wife's opinion on this subject, monsieur."

"What! You wicked man! you, too!"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Pray consider that — "

"My wife has told you, sir. We made a marriage of love, and, like her, I believe that love marriages are the only happy ones."

"To make merchandise of Antonine! I, counsel her to be guilty of an act of shocking meanness, a marriage of interest! to sell herself, in a word, when but an hour ago she confessed her pure and noble love to me! Ah, monsieur, I thought you had a higher opinion of me!"

"Come, come, now, my dear Dutertre, you are a man of sense, confess that these reasons are nothing but romance; help me to convince your wife."

"I repeat, monsieur, that I think as she does."

"Ah," exclaimed M. Pascal, "I did not expect to find here friends so cold and indifferent to what concerned me."

"Sir," exclaimed Sophie, "that reproach is unjust."

"Unjust! alas, I wish it were; but, indeed, I have too much reason to think differently. But a moment ago, your husband refused one of my requests, and now it is you. Ah, it is sad — sad. What can I rely upon after this?"

"Refused what?" said Sophie to her husband, more and more disquieted. "What does he mean, Charles?"

"It is not necessary to mention it, my dear Sophie."

"I think, on the contrary," replied Pascal, "that it would be well to tell your wife, my dear Dutertre, and have her opinion."

"Sir!" exclaimed Dutertre, clasping his hands in dismay.

"Come! is it not a marriage of love?" said Pascal, "you do not have any secrets from each other!"

"Charles, I beseech you, explain to me the meaning of all this. Ah, I saw plainly enough that you were suffering. Monsieur, has anything happened between you and Charles?" said she to Pascal, in a tone of entreaty. "I implore you to tell me."

"My God! a very simple thing happened. You can judge of it yourself, madame — "

"Monsieur!" cried Dutertre, "in the name of the gratitude we owe you, in the name of pity, not one word more, I beseech you, for I can never believe that you will persist in your resolution. And then, what good does it do to torture my wife with needless alarm?"

Then, turning to Madame Dutertre, he said:

"Compose yourself, Sophie, I beg you."

The father Dutertre, hearing the sound of voices as he sat in his chamber, suddenly opened his door, made two steps into the parlour, extending his hands before him, and cried, trembling with excitement:

"Charles! Sophie. My God! what is the matter?"

"My father!" whispered Dutertre, wholly overcome.

"The old man!" said Pascal. "Good! that suits me!"

CHAPTER IX

A moment's silence followed the entrance of the old blind man into the parlour.

Dutertre went quickly to meet his father, took hold of his trembling hand, and said, as he pressed it tenderly:

"Calm yourself, father, it is nothing; a simple discussion, a little lively. Let me take you back to your chamber."

"Charles," said the old man, shaking his head sadly, "your hand is cold, you are nervous, your voice is changed; something has happened which you wish to hide from me."

"You are not mistaken, sir," said Pascal to the old man. "Your son is hiding something from you, and in his interest, in yours, and in the interest of your daughter-in-law and her children, you ought not to be ignorant of it."

"But M. Pascal, can nothing touch your heart?" cried Charles Dutertre. "Are you without pity, without compassion?"

"It is because I pity your obstinate folly, and that of your wife, my dear Dutertre, that I wish to appeal from it, to the good sense of your respectable father."

"Charles," cried Sophie, "however cruel the truth may be, tell it. This doubt, this agony, is beyond my endurance!"

"My son," added the old man, "be frank, as you have always been, and we will have courage."

"You see, my dear Dutertre," persisted M. Pascal, "your worthy father himself wishes to know the truth."

"Monsieur," answered Dutertre, in a broken voice, looking at Pascal with tears which he could hardly restrain, "be good, be generous, as you have been until to-day. Your power is immense, I know; with one word you can plunge us in distress, in disaster; but with one word, too, you can restore to us the peace and happiness which we have owed to you. I implore you, do not be pitiless."

At the sight of the tears, which, in spite of his efforts to control, rose to the eyes of Dutertre, a man so resolute and energetic, Sophie detected the greatness of the danger, and, turning to M. Pascal, said, in a heartrending voice:

"My God! I do not know the danger with which you threaten us, but I am afraid, oh, I am afraid, and I implore you also, M. Pascal."

"After having been our saviour," cried Dutertre, drying the tears which escaped in spite of him, "surely you will not be our executioner!"

"Your executioner!" repeated Pascal. "Please God, my poor friends, it is not I, it is you who wish to be your own executioner. This word you expect from me, this word which can assure your happiness, say it, my dear Dutertre, and our little feast will be as joyous as it ought to be; if not, then do not complain of the bad fate which awaits you. Alas, you will have it so!"

"Charles, if it depends on you," cried Sophie, in a voice of agony, "if this word M. Pascal asks depends on you, then say it, oh, my God, since the salvation of your father and your children depend upon it."

"You hear your wife, my dear Dutertre," resumed Pascal. "Will you be insensible to her voice?"

"Ah, well, then," cried Dutertre, pale and desperate, "since this man is pitiless, you, my father, and you, too, Sophie, can know all. I dismissed Marcelange from my employ. M. Pascal has an interest, of which I am ignorant, in having this man enter the business house of Durand, and he asks me to give to this firm a voucher for the integrity of a wretch whom I have thrown out of my establishment as an arrant impostor."

"Ah, monsieur," said the old man, shocked, as he turned to the side where he supposed M. Pascal to be, "that is impossible. You cannot expect such an unworthy action from my son!"

"And if I refuse to do this degrading thing," said Dutertre, "M. Pascal withdraws from me the capital which I have so rashly accepted, he refuses me credit, and in our present crisis that would be our loss, our ruin."

"Great God!" whispered Sophie, terrified.

"That is not all, father," continued Dutertre. "My wife, too, must pay her tribute of shame. M. Pascal is, he says, in love with Mlle. Antonine, and Sophie must serve this love, which she knows to be impossible, and which for honourable reasons she disapproves, or a threat is still suspended over our heads. Now you have the truth, father, — submit to a ruin as terrible as unforeseen, or commit a base action, such is the alternative to which a man whom we have trusted so long as loyal and generous reduces me."

"That again, always that; so goes the world," interposed M. Pascal, sighing and shrugging his shoulders. "So long as they can receive your aid without making any return, oh, then they flatter you and praise you. It is always 'My noble benefactor, my generous saviour;' they call you 'dear, good man,' load you with attentions; they embroider purses for you and make a feast for you. The little children repeat compliments to you, but let the day come when this poor, innocent man presumes in his turn to ask one or two miserable little favours, then they cry, 'Scoundrel!' 'Unworthy!' 'Infamous!'"

"Any sacrifice, compatible with honour, you might have asked of me, M. Pascal," said Dutertre, in a voice which told how deeply he was wounded, "and I would have made it with joy!"

"Then, what is to be expected?" continued Pascal, without replying to Dutertre, "if the 'good, innocent man,' so good-natured as they suppose him to be, the benefactor, at last, grows weary, ingratitude breaks his heart, for he is naturally sensitive, too sensitive?"

"Ingratitude!" cried Sophie, bursting into tears, "we — we — ingrates, oh, my God!"

"And as the 'good, innocent man' sees a little later that he has been mistaken," continued Pascal, without replying to Sophie, "as he recognises the fact, with pain, that he has been dealing with people incapable of putting their grateful friendship beyond a few puerile prejudices, he says to himself that he would be by far too much of an 'innocent man' to continue to open his purse for the use of such lukewarm friends. So he withdraws his money and his credit as I do, being brought to this resolution by certain circumstances consequent upon the refusal of this dear Dutertre, whom I loved so much, and whom I would love still to call my friend. One last word, sir," added Pascal, addressing the old man. "I have just told you frankly my attitude toward your son, and his toward me; but as it would cost my own heart too much to renounce the faith that I had in the affection of this dear Dutertre, as I know the terrible evils which, through his own fault, must come upon him and his family, I am willing still to give him one quarter of an hour for reconsideration. Let him give me the letter in question, let Madame Dutertre make me the promise that I ask of her, and all shall become again as in the past, and I shall ask for breakfast, and enthusiastically drink a toast to friendship. You are the father of Dutertre, monsieur, you have a great influence over him; judge and decide."

"Charles," said the old man to his son, in a voice full of emotion, "you have acted as an honest man. That is well, but there is still another thing to do; to refuse to vouch for the integrity of a scoundrel is not enough."

"Ah, ah!" interrupted Pascal, "what more, then, is there to do?"

"If M. Pascal," continued the old man, "persists in this dangerous design, you ought, my son, to write to the house of Durand, that for reasons of which you are ignorant, but which are perhaps hostile to their interests, M. Pascal desires to place this Marcelange with them, and that they must be on their guard, because to be silent when an unworthy project is proposed is to become an accomplice."

"I will follow your advice, father," replied Dutertre, in a firm voice.

"Better and better," exclaimed Pascal, sighing, "to ingratitude they add the odious abuse of confidence. Ah, well, I will drink the cup to the dregs. Only, my poor former friends," added he, throwing a strange and sinister glance upon the actors in this scene, "only I fear, you see, that after

drinking it a great deal of bitterness and rancour will remain in my heart, and then, you know, when a legitimate hatred succeeds a tender friendship, this hatred, unhappily, becomes a terrible thing."

"Oh, Charles! he frightens me," whispered the young wife, drawing nearer her husband.

"As to you, my dear Sophie," added the old man, with imperturbable calmness, without replying to M. Pascal's threat, "you ought not only to favour in nothing — the course which you have taken — a marriage which you must disapprove, but if M. Pascal persists in his intentions, you ought, by all means, to enlighten Mlle. Antonine as to the character of the man who seeks her. To do that, you have only to inform her at what an infamous price he put the continuation of the aid he has rendered your husband."

"That is my duty," replied Sophie, in a calmer voice, "and I will do it, father."

"And you, too, my dear Madame Dutertre, to abuse an honest confidence!" said M. Pascal, hiding his anger under a veil of sweetness, "to strike me in my dearest hope, ah, this is generous! God grant that I may not give myself up to cruel retaliation! After two years of friendship to part with such sentiments! But it must be, it must be!" added Pascal, looking alternately at Dutertre and his wife. "Is all ended between us?"

Sophie and her husband preserved a silence full of resignation and dignity.

"Oh, well," said Pascal, taking his hat, "another proof of the ingratitude of men, alas!"

"Monsieur," cried Dutertre, exasperated beyond measure at the affected sensibility of Pascal, "in the presence of the frightful blow with which you intend to crush us, this continued sarcasm is atrocious. Leave us, leave us!"

"Ah, here I am driven away from this house by people who are conscious of owing their happiness to me for so long a time, — their salvation even, they owe to me," said Pascal, walking slowly toward the door. "Driven away from here! I! Ah, this mortifying grief disappoints me, indeed!"

Then, pausing, he rummaged his pocket, and drew out the little purse that Sophie had given him a few moments before, and, handing it to the young wife, he said, with a pitiless accent of sardonic contrition:

"Happily, they are mute, or these pearls of steel would tell me every moment how much my name was blessed in this house from which I am driven away."

Then, with the air of changing his mind, he put the purse back in his pocket, after looking at it with a melancholy smile, and said:

"No, no, I will keep you, poor little innocent purse. You will recall to me the little good I have done, and the cruel deception which has been my reward."

So saying, M. Pascal put his hand on the knob of the door, opened it, and went out, while Sophie and her husband and her father sat in gloomy silence.

This oppressive silence was still unbroken when M. Pascal, returning and opening the door half-way, said across the threshold:

"To tell the truth, Dutertre, I have reflected. Listen to me, my dear Dutertre."

A ray of foolish hope illumined the face of Dutertre; for a moment he believed that, in spite of the cold and sarcastic cruelty that Pascal had first affected, he did feel some pity at last.

Sophie shared the same hope; like her husband she listened with indescribable anguish to the words of the man who was to dispose so absolutely of their fate, while Pascal said:

"Next Saturday is your pay-day, is it not, my dear Dutertre? Let me call you so notwithstanding what has passed between us."

"Thank God, he has some pity," thought Dutertre, and he replied aloud:

"Yes, monsieur."

"I would not wish, you understand, my dear Dutertre," continued Pascal, "to put you in ruinous embarrassment. I know Paris, and in the present business crisis you could not get credit for a cent, especially if it were known that I have withdrawn mine from you, and as, after all, you relied upon my name to meet your liabilities, did you not?"

"Charles, we are saved!" whispered Sophie, panting, "he was only testing us."

Dutertre, struck with this idea, which appeared to him all the more probable as he had at first suspected it, no longer doubted his safety; his heart beat violently, his contracted features relaxed into their ordinary cheerful expression, and he replied, stammering from excess of emotion:

"In fact, sir, trusting blindly to your promises, I relied on your credit as usual."

"Well, my dear Dutertre, that you may not find yourself in an embarrassed position, I have come back to tell you that, as you still have about a week, you had better provide for yourself elsewhere, as you cannot depend on Paris or on me."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.