ÉMILE ZOLA

FRUITFULNESS

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Содержание

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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

"FRUITFULNESS" is the first of a series of four works in which M. Zola proposes to embody what he considers to be the four cardinal principles of human life. These works spring from the previous series of The Three Cities: "Lourdes," "Rome," and "Paris," which dealt with the principles of Faith, Hope, and Charity. The last scene in "Paris," when Marie, Pierre Froment's wife, takes her boy in her arms and consecrates him, so to say, to the city of labor and thought, furnishes the necessary transition from one series to the other. "Fruitfulness," says M. Zola, "creates the home. Thence springs the city. From the idea of citizenship comes that of the fatherland; and love of country, in minds fed by science, leads to the conception of a wider and vaster fatherland, comprising all the peoples of the earth. Of these three stages in the progress of mankind, the fourth still remains to be attained. I have thought then of writing, as it were, a poem in four volumes, in four chants, in which I shall endeavor to sum up the philosophy of all my work. The first of these volumes is 'Fruitfulness'; the second will be called 'Work'; the third, 'Truth'; the last, 'Justice.' In 'Fruitfulness' the hero's name

is Matthew. In the next work it will be Luke; in 'Truth,' Mark; and in 'justice,' John. The children of my brain will, like the four Evangelists preaching the gospel, diffuse the religion of future society, which will be founded on Fruitfulness, Work, Truth, and Justice."

This, then, is M. Zola's reply to the cry repeatedly raised by his hero, Abbe Pierre Froment, in the pages of "Lourdes," "Paris," and "Rome": "A new religion, a new religion!" Critics of those works were careful to point out that no real answer was ever returned to the Abbe's despairing call; and it must be confessed that one must yet wait for the greater part of that answer, since "Fruitfulness," though complete as a narrative, forms but a portion of the whole. It is only after the publication of the succeeding volumes that one will be able to judge how far M. Zola's doctrines and theories in their ensemble may appeal to the requirements of the world.

While "Fruitfulness," as I have said, constitutes a first instalment of M. Zola's conception of a social religion, it embodies a good deal else. The idea of writing some such work first occurred to him many years ago. In 1896 he contributed an article to the Paris *Figaro*, in which he said: "For some ten years now I have been haunted by the idea of a novel, of which I shall, doubtless, never write the first page… That novel would have been called 'Wastage'… and I should have pleaded in it in favor of all the rights of life, with all the passion which I may

have in my heart."[1] M. Zola's article then proceeds to discuss the various social problems, theories, and speculations which are set forth here and there in the present work. Briefly, the genesis of "Fruitfulness" lies in the article I have quoted.

"Fruitfulness" is a book to be judged from several standpoints. It would be unjust and absurd to judge it from one alone, such, for instance, as that of the new social religion to which I have referred. It must be looked at notably as a tract for the times in relation to certain grievous evils from which France and other countries – though more particularly France – are undoubtedly suffering. And it may be said that some such denunciation of those evils was undoubtedly necessary, and that nobody was better placed to pen that denunciation than M. Zola, who, alone of all French writers nowadays, commands universal attention. Whatever opinion may be held of his writings, they have to be reckoned with. Thus, in preparing "Fruitfulness," he was before all else discharging a patriotic duty, and that duty he took in hand in an hour of cruel adversity, when to assist a great cause he withdrew from France and sought for a time a residence in England, where for eleven months I was privileged to help him in maintaining his incognito. "Fruitfulness" was entirely written in England, begun in a Surrey country house, and finished at the Queen's Hotel, Norwood.

It would be superfluous for me to enter here into all the questions which M. Zola raises in his pages. The evils from which

[1] See *Nouvelle Campagne* (1896), par Emile Zola. Paris, 1897, pp. 217-228.

France suffers in relation to the stagnancy of its population, are well known, and that their continuance – if continuance there be – will mean the downfall of the country from its position as one of the world's great powers before the close of the twentieth century, is a mathematical certainty. That M. Zola, in order to combat those evils, and to do his duty as a good citizen anxious to prevent the decline of his country, should have dealt with his subject with the greatest frankness and outspokenness, was only natural. Moreover, absolute freedom of speech exists in France, which is not the case elsewhere. Thus, when I first perused the original proofs of M. Zola's work, I came to the conclusion that any version of it in the English language would be well-nigh impossible. For some time I remained of that opinion, and I made a statement to that effect in a leading literary journal. Subsequently, however, my views became modified. "The man who is ridiculous," wrote a French poet, Barthelemy, "is he whose opinions never change," and thus I at last reverted to a task from which I had turned aside almost in despair.

Various considerations influenced me, and among them was the thought that if "Fruitfulness" were not presented to the public in an English dress, M. Zola's new series would remain incomplete, decapitated so far as British and American readers were concerned. After all, the criticisms dealing with the French original were solely directed against matters of form, the mould in which some part of the work was cast. Its high moral purpose was distinctly recognized by several even of its most bitter

detractors. For me the problem was how to retain the whole ensemble of the narrative and the essence of the lessons which the work inculcates, while recasting some portion of it and sacrificing those matters of form to which exception was taken. It is not for me to say whether I have succeeded in the task; but I think that nothing in any degree offensive to delicate susceptibilities will be found in this present version of M. Zola's book.

The English reviews of the French original showed that if certain portions of it were deemed indiscreet, it none the less teemed with admirable and even delightful pages. Among the English reviewers were two well-known lady writers, Madame Darmesteter (formerly Miss Mary Robinson), and Miss Hannah Lynch. And the former remarked in one part of her critique: "Even this short review reveals how honest, how moral, how human and comely is the fable of *Fecondite*,"[2] while the latter expressed the view that the work was "eminently, pugnaciously virtuous in M. Zola's strictly material conception of virtue." And again: "The pages that tell the story of Mathieu and Marianne, it must be admitted, are as charming as possible. They have a bloom, a beauty, a fragrance we never expected to find in M. Zola's work. The tale is a simple one: the cheerful conquest of fortune and the continual birth of offspring."[3]

Of course, these lady critics did not favor certain features

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[2] *Manchester Guardian*, October 27, 1899.

[3] *Fortnightly Review*, January 1900.

of the original, and one of them, indeed, referred to the evil denounced by M. Zola as a mere evil of the hour, whereas it has been growing and spreading for half a century, gradually sapping all the vitality of France. But beside that evil, beside the downfall of the families it attacks, M. Zola portrays the triumph of rectitude, the triumph which follows faith in the powers of life, and observance of the law of universal labor. "Fruitfulness" contains charming pictures of homely married life, delightful glimpses of childhood and youth: the first smile, the first step, the first word, followed by the playfulness and the flirtations of boyhood, and the happiness which waits on the espousals of those who truly love. And the punishment of the guilty is awful, and the triumph of the righteous is the greatest that can be conceived. All those features have been retained, so far as my abilities have allowed, in the present version, which will at the same time, I think, give the reader unacquainted with the French language a general idea of M. Zola's views on one of the great questions of the age, as well as all the essential portions of a strongly conceived narrative.

E. A. V.
MERTON, SURREY, ENGLAND: April, 1900.

I

THAT morning, in the little pavilion of Chantebled, on the verge of the woods, where they had now been installed for nearly a month, Mathieu was making all haste in order that he might catch the seven-o'clock train which every day conveyed him from Janville to Paris. It was already half-past six, and there were fully two thousand paces from the pavilion to Janville. Afterwards came a railway journey of three-quarters of an hour, and another journey of at least equal duration through Paris, from the Northern Railway terminus to the Boulevard de Grenelle. He seldom reached his office at the factory before half-past eight o'clock.

He had just kissed the children. Fortunately they were asleep; otherwise they would have linked their arms about his neck, laughed and kissed him, being ever unwilling to let him go. And as he hastily returned to the principal bedroom, he found his wife, Marianne, in bed there, but awake and sitting up. She had risen a moment before in order to pull back a curtain, and all the glow of that radiant May morning swept in, throwing a flood of gay sunshine over the fresh and healthy beauty of her four-and-twenty years. He, who was three years the elder, positively adored her.

"You know, my darling," said he, "I must make haste, for I fear I may miss the train – and so manage as well as you can.

You still have thirty sous left, haven't you?"

She began to laugh, looking charming with her bare arms and her loose-flowing dark hair. The ever-recurring pecuniary worries of the household left her brave and joyous. Yet she had been married at seventeen, her husband at twenty, and they already had to provide for four children.

"Oh! we shall be all right," said she. "It's the end of the month to-day, and you'll receive your money to-night. I'll settle our little debts at Janville to-morrow. There are only the Lepailleurs, who worry me with their bill for milk and eggs, for they always look as if they fancied one meant to rob them. But with thirty sous, my dear! why, we shall have quite a high time of it!"

She was still laughing as she held out her firm white arms for the customary morning good-by.

"Run off, since you are in a hurry. I will go to meet you at the little bridge to-night."

"No, no, I insist on your going to bed! You know very well that even if I catch the quarter-to-eleven-o'clock train, I cannot reach Janville before half-past eleven. Ah! what a day I have before me! I had to promise the Moranges that I would take dejeuner with them; and this evening Beauchene is entertaining a customer – a business dinner, which I'm obliged to attend. So go to bed, and have a good sleep while you are waiting for me."

She gently nodded, but would give no positive promise. "Don't forget to call on the landlord," she added, "to tell him that the rain comes into the children's bedroom. It's not right that we should

be soaked here as if we were on the high-way, even if those millionaires, the Seguins du Hordel, do let us have this place for merely six hundred francs a year."

"Ah, yes! I should have forgotten that. I will call on them, I promise you."

Then Mathieu took her in his arms, and there was no ending to their leave-taking. He still lingered. She had begun to laugh again, while giving him many a kiss in return for his own. There was all the love of bounding health between them, the joy that springs from the most perfect union, as when man and wife are but one both in flesh and in soul.

"Run off, run off, darling! Remember to tell Constance that, before she goes into the country, she ought to run down here some Sunday with Maurice."

"Yes, yes, I will tell her – till to-night, darling."

But he came back once more, caught her in a tight embrace, and pressed to her lips a long, loving kiss, which she returned with her whole heart. And then he hurried away.

He usually took an omnibus on his arrival at the Northern Railway terminus. But on the days when only thirty sous remained at home he bravely went through Paris on foot. It was, too, a very fine walk by way of the Rue la Fayette, the Opera-house, the Boulevards, the Rue Royale, and then, after the Place de la Concorde, the Cours la Reine, the Alma bridge, and the Quai d'Orsay.

Beauchene's works were at the very end of the Quai d'Orsay,

between the Rue de la Federation and the Boulevard de Grenelle. There was hereabouts a large square plot, at one end of which, facing the quay, stood a handsome private house of brickwork with white stone dressings, that had been erected by Leon Beauchene, father of Alexandre, the present master of the works. From the balconies one could perceive the houses which were perched aloft in the midst of greenery on the height of Passy, beyond the Seine; whilst on the right arose the campanile of the Trocadero palace. On one side, skirting the Rue de la Federation, one could still see a garden and a little house, which had been the modest dwelling of Leon Beauchene in the heroic days of desperate toil when he had laid the foundations of his fortune. Then the factory buildings and sheds, quite a mass of grayish structures, overtopped by two huge chimneys, occupied both the back part of the ground and that which fringed the Boulevard de Grenelle, the latter being shut off by long windowless walls. This important and well-known establishment manufactured chiefly agricultural appliances, from the most powerful machines to those ingenious and delicate implements on which particular care must be bestowed if perfection is to be attained. In addition to the hundreds of men who worked there daily, there were some fifty women, burnishers and polishers.

The entry to the workshops and offices was in the Rue de la Federation, through a large carriage way, whence one perceived the far-spreading yard, with its paving stones invariably black and often streaked by rivulets of steaming water. Dense smoke

arose from the high chimneys, strident jets of steam emerged from the roof, whilst a low rumbling and a shaking of the ground betokened the activity within, the ceaseless bustle of labor.

It was thirty-five minutes past eight by the big clock of the central building when Mathieu crossed the yard towards the office which he occupied as chief designer. For eight years he had been employed at the works where, after a brilliant and special course of study, he had made his beginning as assistant draughtsman when but nineteen years old, receiving at that time a salary of one hundred francs a month. His father, Pierre Froment,[4] had four sons by Marie his wife – Jean the eldest, then Mathieu, Marc, and Luc – and while leaving them free to choose a particular career he had striven to give each of them some manual calling. Leon Beauchene, the founder of the works, had been dead a year, and his son Alexandre had succeeded him and married Constance Meunier, daughter of a very wealthy wall-paper manufacturer of the Marais, at the time when Mathieu entered the establishment, the master of which was scarcely five years older than himself. It was there that Mathieu had become acquainted with a poor cousin of Alexandre's, Marianne, then sixteen years old, whom he had married during the following year.

Marianne, when only twelve, had become dependent upon her uncle, Leon Beauchene. After all sorts of mishaps a brother of the latter, one Felix Beauchene, a man of adventurous mind but

[4] Of *Lourdes*, *Rome*, and *Paris*.

a blunderhead, had gone to Algeria with his wife and daughter, there to woo fortune afresh; and the farm he had established was indeed prospering when, during a sudden revival of Arab brigandage, both he and his wife were murdered and their home was destroyed. Thus the only place of refuge for the little girl, who had escaped miraculously, was the home of her uncle, who showed her great kindness during the two years of life that remained to him. With her, however, were Alexandre, whose companionship was rather dull, and his younger sister, Seraphine, a big, vicious, and flighty girl of eighteen, who, as it happened, soon left the house amid a frightful scandal – an elopement with a certain Baron Lowicz, a genuine baron, but a swindler and forger, to whom it became necessary to marry her. She then received a dowry of 300,000 francs. Alexandre, after his father's death, made a money match with Constance, who brought him half a million francs, and Marianne then found herself still more a stranger, still more isolated beside her new cousin, a thin, dry, authoritative woman, who ruled the home with absolute sway. Mathieu was there, however, and a few months sufficed: fine, powerful, and healthy love sprang up between the young people; there was no lightning flash such as throws the passion-swayed into each other's arms, but esteem, tenderness, faith, and that mutual conviction of happiness in reciprocal bestowal which tends to indissoluble marriage. And they were delighted at marrying penniless, at bringing one another but their full hearts forever and forever. The only change

in Mathieu's circumstances was an increase of salary to two hundred francs a month. True, his new cousin by marriage just vaguely hinted at a possible partnership, but that would not be till some very much later date.

As it happened Mathieu Froment gradually became indispensable at the works. The young master, Alexandre Beauchene, passed through an anxious crisis. The dowry which his father had been forced to draw from his coffers in order to get Seraphine married, and other large expenses which had been occasioned by the girl's rebellious and perverse conduct, had left but little working capital in the business. Then, too, on the morrow of Leon Beauchene's death it was found that, with the carelessness often evinced in such matters, he had neglected to leave a will; so that Seraphine eagerly opposed her brother's interests, demanding her personal share of the inheritance, and even suggesting the sale of the works. The property had narrowly escaped being cut up, annihilated. And Alexandre Beauchene still shivered with terror and anger at the recollection of that time, amidst all his delight at having at last rid himself of his sister by paying her in money the liberally estimated value of her share. It was in order to fill up the void thus created in his finances that he had espoused the half-million represented by Constance – an ugly creature, as he himself bitterly acknowledged, coarse male as he was. Truth to tell, she was so thin, so scraggy, that before consenting to make her his wife he had often called her "that bag of bones." But, on the other hand, thanks to his marriage

with her, all his losses were made good in five or six years' time; the business of the works even doubled, and great prosperity set in. And Mathieu, having become a most active and necessary coadjutor, ended by taking the post of chief designer, at a salary of four thousand two hundred francs per annum.

Morange, the chief accountant, whose office was near Mathieu's, thrust his head through the doorway as soon as he heard the young man installing himself at his drawing-table. "I say, my dear Froment," he exclaimed, "don't forget that you are to take dejeuner with us."

"Yes, yes, my good Morange, it's understood. I will look in for you at twelve o'clock."

Then Mathieu very carefully scrutinized a wash drawing of a very simple but powerful steam thresher, an invention of his own, on which he had been working for some time past, and which a big landowner of Beauce, M. Firon-Badinier, was to examine during the afternoon.

The door of the master's private room was suddenly thrown wide open and Beauchene appeared – tall, with a ruddy face, a narrow brow, and big brown, protruding eyes. He had a rather large nose, thick lips, and a full black beard, on which he bestowed great care, as he likewise did on his hair, which was carefully combed over his head in order to conceal the serious baldness that was already coming upon him, although he was scarcely two-and-thirty. Frock-coated the first thing in the morning, he was already smoking a big cigar; and his loud voice,

his peals of gayety, his bustling ways, all betokened an egotist and good liver still in his prime, a man for whom money – capital increased and increased by the labor of others – was the one only sovereign power.

"Ah! ah! it's ready, is it not?" said he; "Monsieur Firon-Badinier has again written me that he will be here at three o'clock. And you know that I'm going to take you to the restaurant with him this evening; for one can never induce those fellows to give orders unless one plies them with good wine. It annoys Constance to have it done here; and, besides, I prefer to entertain those people in town. You warned Marianne, eh?"

"Certainly. She knows that I shall return by the quarter-to-eleven-o'clock train."

Beauchene had sunk upon a chair: "Ah! my dear fellow, I'm worn out," he continued; "I dined in town last night; I got to bed only at one o'clock. And there was a terrible lot of work waiting for me this morning. One positively needs to be made of iron."

Until a short time before he had shown himself a prodigious worker, endowed with really marvellous energy and strength. Moreover, he had given proof of unfailing business instinct with regard to many profitable undertakings. Invariably the first to appear at the works, he looked after everything, foresaw everything, filling the place with his bustling zeal, and doubling his output year by year. Recently, however, fatigue had been gaining ground on him. He had always sought plenty of amusement, even amid the hard-working life he led. But

nowadays certain "sprees," as he called them, left him fairly exhausted.

He gazed at Mathieu: "You seem fit enough, you do!" he said. "How is it that you manage never to look tired?"

As a matter of fact, the young man who stood there erect before his drawing-table seemed possessed of the sturdy health of a young oak tree. Tall and slender, he had the broad, lofty, tower-like brow of the Froments. He wore his thick hair cut quite short, and his beard, which curled slightly, in a point. But the chief expression of his face rested in his eyes, which were at once deep and bright, keen and thoughtful, and almost invariably illumined by a smile. They showed him to be at once a man of thought and of action, very simple, very gay, and of a kindly disposition.

"Oh! I," he answered with a laugh, "I behave reasonably."

But Beauchene protested: "No, you don't! The man who already has four children when he is only twenty-seven can't claim to be reasonable. And twins too – your Blaise and your Denis to begin with! And then your boy Ambroise and your little girl Rose. Without counting the other little girl that you lost at her birth. Including her, you would now have had five youngsters, you wretched fellow! No, no, I'm the one who behaves reasonably – I, who have but one child, and, like a prudent, sensible man, desire no others!"

He often made such jesting remarks as these, through which filtered his genuine indignation; for he deemed the young couple

to be over-careless of their interests, and declared that the prolificness of his cousin Marianne was quite scandalous.

Accustomed as Mathieu was to these attacks, which left him perfectly serene, he went on laughing, without even giving a reply, when a workman abruptly entered the room – one who was currently called "old Moineaud," though he was scarcely three-and-forty years of age. Short and thick-set, he had a bullet head, a bull's neck, and face and hands scarred and dented by more than a quarter of a century of toil. By calling he was a fitter, and he had come to submit a difficulty which had just arisen in the piecing together of a reaping machine. But, his employer, who was still angrily thinking of over-numerous families, did not give him time to explain his purpose.

"And you, old Moineaud, how many children have you?" he inquired.

"Seven, Monsieur Beauchene," the workman replied, somewhat taken aback. "I've lost three."

"So, including them, you would now have ten? Well, that's a nice state of things! How can you do otherwise than starve?"

Moineaud began to laugh like the gay thriftless Paris workman that he was. The little ones? Well, they grew up without his even noticing it, and, indeed, he was really fond of them, so long as they remained at home. And, besides, they worked as they grew older, and brought a little money in. However, he preferred to answer his employer with a jest which set them all laughing.

After he had explained the difficulty with the reaper, the

others followed him to examine the work for themselves. They were already turning into a passage, when Beauchene, seeing the door of the women's workshop open, determined to pass that way, so that he might give his customary look around. It was a long, spacious place, where the polishers, in smocks of black serge, sat in double rows polishing and grinding their pieces at little work-boards. Nearly all of them were young, a few were pretty, but most had low and common faces. An animal odor and a stench of rancid oil pervaded the place.

The regulations required perfect silence there during work. Yet all the girls were gossiping. As soon, however, as the master's approach was signalled the chatter abruptly ceased. There was but one girl who, having her head turned, and thus seeing nothing of Beauchene, went on furiously abusing a companion, with whom she had previously started a dispute. She and the other were sisters, and, as it happened, daughters of old Moineaud. Euphrasie, the younger one, she who was shouting, was a skinny creature of seventeen, light-haired, with a long, lean, pointed face, uncomely and malignant; whereas the elder, Norine, barely nineteen, was a pretty girl, a blonde like her sister, but having a milky skin, and withal plump and sturdy, showing real shoulders, arms, and hips, and one of those bright sunshiny faces, with wild hair and black eyes, all the freshness of the Parisian hussy, aglow with the fleeting charm of youth.

Norine was ever quarrelling with Euphrasie, and was pleased to have her caught in a misdeed; so she allowed her to rattle on.

And it thereupon became necessary for Beauchene to intervene. He habitually evinced great severity in the women's workshop, for he had hitherto held the view that an employer who jested with his workgirls was a lost man. Thus, in spite of the low character of which he was said to give proof in his walks abroad, there had as yet never been the faintest suggestion of scandal in connection with him and the women in his employ.

"Well, now, Mademoiselle Euphrasie!" he exclaimed; "do you intend to be quiet? This is quite improper. You are fined twenty sous, and if I hear you again you will be locked out for a week."

The girl had turned round in consternation. Then, stifling her rage, she cast a terrible glance at her sister, thinking that she might at least have warned her. But the other, with the discreet air of a pretty wench conscious of her attractiveness, continued smiling, looking her employer full in the face, as if certain that she had nothing to fear from him. Their eyes met, and for a couple of seconds their glances mingled. Then he, with flushed cheeks and an angry air, resumed, addressing one and all: "As soon as the superintendent turns her back you chatter away like so many magpies. Just be careful, or you will have to deal with me!"

Moineaud, the father, had witnessed the scene unmoved, as if the two girls – she whom the master had scolded, and she who slyly gazed at him – were not his own daughters. And now the round was resumed and the three men quitted the women's workshop amidst profound silence, which only the whir of the

little grinders disturbed.

When the fitting difficulty had been overcome downstairs and Moineaud had received his orders, Beauchene returned to his residence accompanied by Mathieu, who wished to convey Marianne's invitation to Constance. A gallery connected the black factory buildings with the luxurious private house on the quay. And they found Constance in a little drawing-room hung with yellow satin, a room to which she was very partial. She was seated near a sofa, on which lay little Maurice, her fondly prized and only child, who had just completed his seventh year.

"Is he ill?" inquired Mathieu.

The child seemed sturdily built, and he greatly resembled his father, though he had a more massive jaw. But he was pale and there was a faint ring round his heavy eyelids. His mother, that "bag of bones," a little dark woman, yellow and withered at six-and-twenty, looked at him with an expression of egotistical pride.

"Oh, no! he's never ill," she answered. "Only he has been complaining of his legs. And so I made him lie down, and I wrote last night to ask Dr. Boutan to call this morning."

"Pooh!" exclaimed Beauchene with a hearty laugh, "women are all the same! A child who is as strong as a Turk! I should just like anybody to tell me that he isn't strong."

Precisely at that moment in walked Dr. Boutan, a short, stout man of forty, with very keen eyes set in a clean-shaven, heavy, but extremely good-natured face. He at once examined the child, felt and sounded him; then with his kindly yet serious air he said:

"No, no, there's nothing. It is the mere effect of growth. The lad has become rather pale through spending the winter in Paris, but a few months in the open air, in the country, will set him right again."

"I told you so!" cried Beauchene.

Constance had kept her son's little hand in her own. He had again stretched himself out and closed his eyes in a weary way, whilst she, in her happiness, continued smiling. Whenever she chose she could appear quite pleasant-looking, however unprepossessing might be her features. The doctor had seated himself, for he was fond of lingering and chatting in the houses of friends. A general practitioner, and one who more particularly tended the ailments of women and children, he was naturally a confessor, knew all sorts of secrets, and was quite at home in family circles. It was he who had attended Constance at the birth of that much-spoiled only son, and Marianne at the advent of the four children she already had.

Mathieu had remained standing, awaiting an opportunity to deliver his invitation. "Well," said he, "if you are soon leaving for the country, you must come one Sunday to Janville. My wife would be so delighted to see you there, to show you our encampment."

Then he jested respecting the bareness of the lonely pavilion which they occupied, recounting that as yet they possessed only a dozen plates and five egg-cups. But Beauchene knew the pavilion, for he went shooting in the neighborhood every winter,

having a share in the tenancy of some extensive woods, the shooting-rights over which had been parcelled out by the owner.

"Seguin," said he, "is a friend of mine. I have lunched at your pavilion. It's a perfect hovel!"

Then Constance, contemptuous at the idea of such poverty, recalled what Madame Seguin – to whom she referred as Valentine – had told her of the dilapidated condition of the old shooting-box. But the doctor, after listening with a smile, broke in:

"Mme. Seguin is a patient of mine. At the time when her last child was born I advised her to stay at that pavilion. The atmosphere is wholesome, and children ought to spring up there like couch-grass."

Thereupon, with a sonorous laugh, Beauchene began to jest in his habitual way, remarking that if the doctor were correct there would probably be no end to Mathieu's progeny, numerous as it already was. But this elicited an angry protest from Constance, who on the subject of children held the same views as her husband himself professed in his more serious moments.

Mathieu thoroughly understood what they both meant. They regarded him and his wife with derisive pity, tinged with anger.

The advent of the young couple's last child, little Rose, had already increased their expenses to such a point that they had been obliged to seek refuge in the country, in a mere pauper's hovel. And yet, in spite of Beauchene's sneers and Constance's angry remarks, Mathieu outwardly remained very

calm. Constance and Marianne had never been able to agree; they differed too much in all respects; and for his part he laughed off every attack, unwilling as he was to let anger master him, lest a rupture should ensue.

But Beauchene waxed passionate on the subject. That question of the birth-rate and the present-day falling off in population was one which he thought he had completely mastered, and on which he held forth at length authoritatively. He began by challenging the impartiality of Boutan, whom he knew to be a fervent partisan of large families. He made merry with him, declaring that no medical man could possibly have a disinterested opinion on the subject. Then he brought out all that he vaguely knew of Malthusianism, the geometrical increase of births, and the arithmetical increase of food-substances, the earth becoming so populous as to be reduced to a state of famine within two centuries. It was the poor's own fault, said he, if they led a life of starvation; they had only to limit themselves to as many children as they could provide for. The rich were falsely accused of social wrong-doing; they were by no means responsible for poverty. Indeed, they were the only reasonable people; they alone, by limiting their families, acted as good citizens should act. And he became quite triumphant, repeating that he knew of no cause for self-reproach, and that his ever-growing fortune left him with an easy conscience. It was so much the worse for the poor, if they were bent on remaining poor. In vain did the doctor urge that the Malthusian theories were shattered,

that the calculations had been based on a possible, not a real, increase of population; in vain too did he prove that the present-day economic crisis, the evil distribution of wealth under the capitalist system, was the one hateful cause of poverty, and that whenever labor should be justly apportioned among one and all the fruitful earth would easily provide sustenance for happy men ten times more numerous than they are now. The other refused to listen to anything, took refuge in his egotism, declared that all those matters were no concern of his, that he felt no remorse at being rich, and that those who wished to become rich had, in the main, simply to do as he had done.

"Then, logically, this is the end of France, eh?" Boutan remarked maliciously. "The number of births ever increases in Germany, Russia, and elsewhere, while it decreases in a terrible way among us. Numerically the rank we occupy in Europe is already very inferior to what it formerly was; and yet number means power more than ever nowadays. It has been calculated that an average of four children per family is necessary in order that population may increase and the strength of a nation be maintained. You have but one child; you are a bad patriot."

At this Beauchene flew into a tantrum, quite beside himself, and gasped: "I a bad patriot! I, who kill myself with hard work! I, who even export French machinery!.. Yes, certainly I see families, acquaintances around me who may well allow themselves four children; and I grant that they deserve censure when they have no families. But as for me, my dear doctor, it is

impossible. You know very well that in my position I absolutely can't."

Then, for the hundredth time, he gave his reasons, relating how the works had narrowly escaped being cut into pieces, annihilated, simply because he had unfortunately been burdened with a sister. Seraphine had behaved abominably. There had been first her dowry; next her demands for the division of the property on their father's death; and the works had been saved only by means of a large pecuniary sacrifice which had long crippled their prosperity. And people imagined that he would be as imprudent as his father! Why, if Maurice should have a brother or a sister, he might hereafter find himself in the same dire embarrassment, in which the family property might already have been destroyed. No, no! He would not expose the boy to the necessity of dividing the inheritance in accordance with badly framed laws. He was resolved that Maurice should be the sole master of the fortune which he himself had derived from his father, and which he would transmit to his heir increased tenfold. For his son he dreamt of supreme wealth, a colossal fortune, such as nowadays alone ensures power.

Mathieu, refraining from any intervention, listened and remained grave; for this question of the birth-rate seemed to him a frightful one, the foremost of all questions, deciding the destiny of mankind and the world. There has never been any progress but such as has been determined by increase of births. If nations have accomplished evolutions, if civilization has advanced, it

is because the nations have multiplied and subsequently spread through all the countries of the earth. And will not to-morrow's evolution, the advent of truth and justice, be brought about by the constant onslaught of the greater number, the revolutionary fruitfulness of the toilers and the poor?

It is quite true that Mathieu did not plainly say all these things to himself; indeed, he felt slightly ashamed of the four children that he already had, and was disturbed by the counsels of prudence addressed to him by the Beauchenes. But within him there struggled his faith in life, his belief that the greatest possible sum of life must bring about the greatest sum of happiness.

At last, wishing to change the subject, he bethought himself of Marianne's commission, and at the first favorable opportunity exclaimed: "Well, we shall rely on you, Marianne and I, for Sunday after next, at Janville."

But there was still no answer, for just then a servant came to say that a woman with an infant in her arms desired to see Madame. And Beauchene, having recognized the wife of Moineaud, the fitter, bade her come in. Boutan, who had now risen, was prompted by curiosity to remain a little longer.

La Moineaude, short and fat like her husband, was a woman of about forty, worn out before her time, with ashen face, pale eyes, thin faded hair, and a weak mouth which already lacked many teeth. A large family had been too much for her; and, moreover, she took no care of herself.

"Well, my good woman," Constance inquired, "what do you

wish with me?"

But La Moineaude remained quite scared by the sight of all those people whom she had not expected to find there. She said nothing. She had hoped to speak to the lady privately.

"Is this your last-born?" Beauchene asked her as he looked at the pale, puny child on her arm.

"Yes, monsieur, it's my little Alfred; he's ten months old and I've had to wean him, for I couldn't feed him any longer. I had nine others before this one, but three are dead. My eldest son, Eugene, is a soldier in Tonquin. You have my two big girls, Euphrasie and Norine, at the works. And I have three left at home – Victor, who is now fifteen, then Cecile and Irma, who are ten and seven. After Irma I thought I had done with children for good, and I was well pleased. But, you see, this urchin came! And I, forty too – it's not just! The good Lord must surely have abandoned us."

Then Dr. Boutan began to question her. He avoided looking at the Beauchenes, but there was a malicious twinkle in his little eyes, and it was evident that he took pleasure in recapitulating the employer's arguments against excessive prolificness. He pretended to get angry and to reproach the Moineauds for their ten wretched children – the boys fated to become food for powder, the girls always liable to misfortune. And he gave the woman to understand that it was her own fault if she was in distress; for people with a tribe of children about them could never become rich. And the poor creature sadly answered that

he was quite right, but that no idea of becoming rich could ever have entered their heads. Moineaud knew well enough that he would never be a cabinet minister, and so it was all the same to them how many children they might have on their hands. Indeed, a number proved a help when the youngsters grew old enough to go out to work.

Beauchene had become silent and slowly paced the room. A slight chill, a feeling of uneasiness was springing up, and so Constance made haste to inquire: "Well, my good woman, what is it I can do for you?"

"*Mon Dieu*, madame, it worries me; it's something which Moineaud didn't dare to ask of Monsieur Beauchene. For my part I hoped to find you alone and beg you to intercede for us. The fact is we should be very, very grateful if our little Victor could only be taken on at the works."

"But he is only fifteen," exclaimed Beauchene. "You must wait till he's sixteen. The law is strict."

"No doubt. Only one might perhaps just tell a little fib. It would be rendering us such a service – "

"No, it is impossible."

Big tears welled into La Moineaude's eyes. And Mathieu, who had listened with passionate interest, felt quite upset. Ah! that wretched toil-doomed flesh that hastened to offer itself without waiting until it was even ripe for work! Ah! the laborer who is prepared to lie, whom hunger sets against the very law designed for his own protection!

When La Moineaude had gone off in despair the doctor continued speaking of juvenile and female labor. As soon as a woman first finds herself a mother she can no longer continue toiling at a factory. Her lying-in and the nursing of her babe force her to remain at home, or else grievous infirmities may ensue for her and her offspring. As for the child, it becomes anemic, sometimes crippled; besides, it helps to keep wages down by being taken to work at a low scale of remuneration. Then the doctor went on to speak of the prolificness of wretchedness, the swarming of the lower classes. Was not the most hateful natality of all that which meant the endless increase of starvelings and social rebels?

"I perfectly understand you," Beauchene ended by saying, without any show of anger, as he abruptly brought his perambulations to an end. "You want to place me in contradiction with myself, and make me confess that I accept Moineaud's seven children and need them, whereas I, with my fixed determination to rest content with an only son, suppress, as it were, a family in order that I may not have to subdivide my estate. France, 'the country of only sons,' as folks say nowadays – that's it, eh? But, my dear fellow, the question is so intricate, and at bottom I am altogether in the right!"

Then he wished to explain things, and clapped his hand to his breast, exclaiming that he was a liberal, a democrat, ready to demand all really progressive measures. He willingly recognized that children were necessary, that the army required soldiers,

and the factories workmen. Only he also invoked the prudential duties of the higher classes, and reasoned after the fashion of a man of wealth, a conservative clinging to the fortune he has acquired.

Mathieu meanwhile ended by understanding the brutal truth: Capital is compelled to favor the multiplication of lives foredoomed to wretchedness; in spite of everything it must stimulate the prolificness of the wage-earning classes, in order that its profits may continue. The law is that there must always be an excess of children in order that there may be enough cheap workers. Then also speculation on the wages' ratio wrests all nobility from labor, which is regarded as the worst misfortune a man can be condemned to, when in reality it is the most precious of boons. Such, then, is the cancer preying upon mankind. In countries of political equality and economical inequality the capitalist regime, the faulty distribution of wealth, at once restrains and precipitates the birth-rate by perpetually increasing the wrongful apportionment of means. On one side are the rich folk with "only" sons, who continually increase their fortunes; on the other, the poor folk, who, by reason of their unrestrained prolificness, see the little they possess crumble yet more and more. If labor be honored to-morrow, if a just apportionment of wealth be arrived at, equilibrium will be restored. Otherwise social revolution lies at the end of the road.

But Beauchene, in his triumphant manner, tried to show that he possessed great breadth of mind; he admitted the disquieting

strides of a decrease of population, and denounced the causes of it – alcoholism, militarism, excessive mortality among infants, and other numerous matters. Then he indicated remedies; first, reductions in taxation, fiscal means in which he had little faith; then freedom to will one's estate as one pleased, which seemed to him more efficacious; a change, too, in the marriage laws, without forgetting the granting of affiliation rights.

However, Boutan ended by interrupting him. "All the legislative measures in the world will do nothing," said the doctor. "Manners and customs, our notions of what is moral and what is not, our very conceptions of the beautiful in life – all must be changed. If France is becoming depopulated, it is because she so chooses. It is simply necessary then for her to choose so no longer. But what a task – a whole world to create anew!"

At this Mathieu raised a superb cry: "Well! we'll create it. I've begun well enough, surely!"

But Constance, after laughing in a constrained way, in her turn thought it as well to change the subject. And so she at last replied to his invitation, saying that she would do her best to go to Janville, though she feared she might not be able to dispose of a Sunday to do so.

Dr. Boutan then took his leave, and was escorted to the door by Beauchene, who still went on jesting, like a man well pleased with life, one who was satisfied with himself and others, and who felt certain of being able to arrange things as might best suit his pleasure and his interests.

An hour later, a few minutes after midday, as Mathieu, who had been delayed in the works, went up to the offices to fetch Morange as he had promised to do, it occurred to him to take a short cut through the women's workshop. And there, in that spacious gallery, already deserted and silent, he came upon an unexpected scene which utterly amazed him. On some pretext or other Norine had lingered there the last, and Beauchene was with her, clasping her around the waist whilst he eagerly pressed his lips to hers. But all at once they caught sight of Mathieu and remained thunderstruck. And he, for his part, fled precipitately, deeply annoyed at having been a surprised witness to such a secret.

II

MORANGE, the chief accountant at Beauchene's works, was a man of thirty-eight, bald and already gray-headed, but with a superb dark, fan-shaped beard, of which he was very proud. His full limpid eyes, straight nose, and well-shaped if somewhat large mouth had in his younger days given him the reputation of being a handsome fellow. He still took great care of himself, invariably wore a tall silk hat, and preserved the correct appearance of a very painstaking and well-bred clerk.

"You don't know our new flat yet, do you?" he asked Mathieu as he led him away. "Oh! it's perfect, as you will see. A bedroom for us and another for Reine. And it is so close to the works too. I get there in four minutes, watch in hand."

He, Morange, was the son of a petty commercial clerk who had died on his stool after forty years of cloistral office-life. And he had married a clerk's daughter, one Valerie Duchemin, the eldest of four girls whose parents' home had been turned into a perfect hell, full of shameful wretchedness and unacknowledgable poverty, through this abominable incumbrance. Valerie, who was good-looking and ambitious, was lucky enough, however, to marry that handsome, honest, and hard-working fellow, Morange, although she was quite without a dowry; and, this accomplished, she indulged in the dream of climbing a little higher up the social ladder, and

freeing herself from the loathsome world of petty clerkdom by making the son whom she hoped to have either an advocate or a doctor. Unfortunately the much-desired child proved to be a girl; and Valerie trembled, fearful of finding herself at last with four daughters on her hands, just as her mother had. Her dream thereupon changed, and she resolved to incite her husband onward to the highest posts, so that she might ultimately give her daughter a large dowry, and by this means gain that admittance to superior spheres which she so eagerly desired. Her husband, who was weak and extremely fond of her, ended by sharing her ambition, ever revolving schemes of pride and conquest for her benefit. But he had now been eight years at the Beauchene works, and he still earned but five thousand francs a year. This drove him and his wife to despair. Assuredly it was not at Beauchene's that he would ever make his fortune.

"You see!" he exclaimed, after going a couple of hundred yards with Mathieu along the Boulevard de Grenelle, "it is that new house yonder at the street corner. It has a stylish appearance, eh?"

Mathieu then perceived a lofty modern pile, ornamented with balconies and sculpture work, which looked quite out of place among the poor little houses predominating in the district.

"Why, it is a palace!" he exclaimed, in order to please Morange, who thereupon drew himself up quite proudly.

"You will see the staircase, my dear fellow! Our place, you know, is on the fifth floor. But that is of no consequence with

such a staircase, so easy, so soft, that one climbs it almost without knowing."

Thereupon Morange showed his guest into the vestibule as if he were ushering him into a temple. The stucco walls gleamed brightly; there was a carpet on the stairs, and colored glass in the windows. And when, on reaching the fifth story, the cashier opened the door with his latchkey, he repeated, with an air of delight: "You will see, you will see!"

Valerie and Reine must have been on the watch, for they hastened forward. At thirty-two Valerie was still young and charming. She was a pleasant-looking brunette, with a round smiling face in a setting of superb hair. She had a full, round bust, and admirable shoulders, of which her husband felt quite proud whenever she showed herself in a low-necked dress. Reine, at this time twelve years old, was the very portrait of her mother, showing much the same smiling, if rather longer, face under similar black tresses.

"Ah! it is very kind of you to accept our invitation," said Valerie gayly as she pressed both Mathieu's hands. "What a pity that Madame Froment could not come with you! Reine, why don't you relieve the gentleman of his hat?"

Then she immediately continued: "We have a nice light anteroom, you see. Would you like to glance over our flat while the eggs are being boiled? That will always be one thing done, and you will then at least know where you are lunching."

All this was said in such an agreeable way, and Morange on

his side smiled so good-naturedly, that Mathieu willingly lent himself to this innocent display of vanity. First came the parlor, the corner room, the walls of which were covered with pearl-gray paper with a design of golden flowers, while the furniture consisted of some of those white lacquered Louis XVI. pieces which makers turn out by the gross. The rosewood piano showed like a big black blot amidst all the rest. Then, overlooking the Boulevard de Grenelle, came Reine's bedroom, pale blue, with furniture of polished pine. Her parents' room, a very small apartment, was at the other end of the flat, separated from the parlor by the dining-room. The hangings adorning it were yellow; and a bedstead, a washstand, and a wardrobe, all of thuya, had been crowded into it. Finally the classic "old carved oak" triumphed in the dining-room, where a heavily gilded hanging lamp flashed like fire above the table, dazzling in its whiteness.

"Why, it's delightful," Mathieu, repeated, by way of politeness; "why, it's a real gem of a place."

In their excitement, father, mother, and daughter never ceased leading him hither and thither, explaining matters to him and making him feel the things. He was most struck, by the circumstance that the place recalled something he had seen before; he seemed to be familiar with the arrangement of the drawing-room, and with the way in which the nicknacks in the bedchamber were set out. And all at once he remembered. Influenced by envy and covert admiration, the Moranges, despite themselves, no doubt, had tried to copy the Beauchenes. Always

short of money as they were, they could only and by dint of great sacrifices indulge in a species of make-believe luxury. Nevertheless they were proud of it, and, by imitating the envied higher class from afar, they imagined that they drew nearer to it.

"And then," Morange exclaimed, as he opened the dining-room window, "there is also this."

Outside, a balcony ran along the house-front, and at that height the view was really a very fine one, similar to that obtained from the Beauchene mansion but more extensive, the Seine showing in the distance, and the heights of Passy rising above the nearer and lower house-roofs.

Valerie also called attention to the prospect. "It is magnificent, is it not?" said she; "far better than the few trees that one can see from the quay."

The servant was now bringing the boiled eggs and they took their seats at table, while Morange victoriously explained that the place altogether cost him sixteen hundred francs a year. It was cheap indeed, though the amount was a heavy charge on Morange's slender income. Mathieu now began to understand that he had been invited more particularly to admire the new flat, and these worthy people seemed so delighted to triumph over it before him that he took the matter gayly and without thought of spite. There was no calculating ambition in his nature; he envied nothing of the luxury he brushed against in other people's homes, and he was quite satisfied with the snug modest life he led with Marianne and his children. Thus he simply felt surprised at

finding the Moranges so desirous of cutting a figure and making money, and looked at them with a somewhat sad smile.

Valerie was wearing a pretty gown of foulard with a pattern of little yellow flowers, while her daughter, Reine, whom she liked to deck out coquettishly, had a frock of blue linen stuff. There was rather too much luxury about the meal also. Soles followed the eggs, and then came cutlets, and afterwards asparagus.

The conversation began with some mention of Janville.

"And so your children are in good health? Oh! they are very fine children indeed. And you really like the country? How funny! I think I should feel dreadfully bored there, for there is too great a lack of amusements. Why, yes, we shall be delighted to go to see you there, since Madame Froment is kind enough to invite us."

Then, as was bound to happen, the talk turned on the Beauchenes. This was a subject which haunted the Moranges, who lived in perpetual admiration of the Beauchenes, though at times they covertly criticised them. Valerie was very proud of being privileged to attend Constance's Saturday "at-homes," and of having been twice invited to dinner by her during the previous winter. She on her side now had a day of her own, Tuesday, and she even gave little private parties, and half ruined herself in providing refreshments at them. As for her acquaintances, she spoke with profound respect of Mme. Seguin du Hordel and that lady's magnificent mansion in the Avenue d'Antin, for Constance had obligingly obtained her an invitation to a ball there. But

she was particularly vain of the friendship of Beauchene's sister, Seraphine, whom she invariably called "Madame la Baronne de Lowicz."

"The Baroness came to my at-home one afternoon," she said. "She is so very good-natured and so gay! You knew her formerly, did you not? After her marriage, eh? when she became reconciled to her brother and their wretched disputes about money matters were over. By the way, she has no great liking for Madame Beauchene, as you must know."

Then she again reverted to the manufacturer's wife, declared that little Maurice, however sturdy he might look, was simply puffed out with bad flesh; and she remarked that it would be a terrible blow for the parents if they should lose that only son. The subject of children was thus started, and when Mathieu, laughing, observed that they, the Moranges, had but one child, the cashier protested that it was unfair to compare him with M. Beauchene, who was such a wealthy man. Valerie, for her part, pictured the position of her parents, afflicted with four daughters, who had been obliged to wait months and months for boots and frocks and hats, and had grown up anyhow, in perpetual terror lest they should never find husbands. A family was all very well, but when it happened to consist of daughters the situation became terrible for people of limited means; for if daughters were to be launched properly into life they must have dowries.

"Besides," said she, "I am very ambitious for my husband, and I am convinced that he may rise to a very high position if he

will only listen to me. But he must not be saddled with a lot of incumbrances. As things stand, I trust that we may be able to get rich and give Reine a suitable dowry."

Morange, quite moved by this little speech, caught hold of his wife's hand and kissed it. Weak and good-natured as he was, Valerie was really the one with will. It was she who had instilled some ambition into him, and he esteemed her the more for it.

"My wife is a thoroughly good woman, you know, my dear Froment," said he. "She has a good head as well as a good heart."

Then, while Valerie recapitulated her dream of wealth, the splendid flat she would have, the receptions she would hold, and the two months which, like the Beauchenes, she would spend at the seaside every summer, Mathieu looked at her and her husband and pondered their position. Their case was very different from that of old Moineaud, who knew that he would never be a cabinet minister. Morange possibly dreamt that his wife would indeed make him a minister some day. Every petty bourgeois in a democratic community has a chance of rising and wishes to do so. Indeed, there is a universal, ferocious rush, each seeking to push the others aside so that he may the more speedily climb a rung of the social ladder. This general ascent, this phenomenon akin to capillarity, is possible only in a country where political equality and economic inequality prevail; for each has the same right to fortune and has but to conquer it. There is, however, a struggle of the vilest egotism, if one wishes to taste the pleasures of the highly placed, pleasures which are displayed

to the gaze of all and are eagerly coveted by nearly everybody in the lower spheres. Under a democratic constitution a nation cannot live happily if its manners and customs are not simple, and if the conditions of life are not virtually equal for one and all. Under other circumstances than these the liberal professions prove all-devouring: there is a rush for public functions; manual toil is regarded with contempt; luxury increases and becomes necessary; and wealth and power are furiously appropriated by assault in order that one may greedily taste the voluptuousness of enjoyment. And in such a state of affairs, children, as Valerie put it, were incumbrances, whereas one needed to be free, absolutely unburdened, if one wished to climb over all one's competitors.

Mathieu also thought of that law of imitation which impels even the least fortunate to impoverish themselves by striving to copy the happy ones of the world. How great the distress which really lurks beneath that envied luxury that is copied at such great cost! All sorts of useless needs are created, and production is turned aside from the strictly necessary. One can no longer express hardship by saying that people lack bread; what they lack in the majority of cases is the superfluous, which they are unable to renounce without imagining that they have gone to the dogs and are in danger of starvation.

At dessert, when the servant was no longer present, Morange, excited by his good meal, became expansive. Glancing at his wife he winked towards their guest, saying:

"Come, he's a safe friend; one may tell him everything."

And when Valerie had consented with a smile and a nod, he went on: "Well, this is the matter, my dear fellow: it is possible that I may soon leave the works. Oh! it's not decided, but I'm thinking of it. Yes, I've been thinking of it for some months past; for, when all is said, to earn five thousand francs a year, after eight years' zeal, and to think that one will never earn much more, is enough to make one despair of life."

"It's monstrous," the young woman interrupted: "it is like breaking one's head intentionally against a wall."

"Well, in such circumstances, my dear friend, the best course is to look out for something elsewhere, is it not? Do you remember Michaud, whom I had under my orders at the works some six years ago? A very intelligent fellow he was. Well, scarcely six years have elapsed since he left us to go to the Credit National, and what do you think he is now earning there? Twelve thousand francs – you hear me – twelve thousand francs!"

The last words rang out like a trumpet-call. The Moranges' eyes dilated with ecstasy. Even the little girl became very red.

"Last March," continued Morange, "I happened to meet Michaud, who told me all that, and showed himself very amiable. He offered to take me with him and help me on in my turn. Only there's some risk to run. He explained to me that I must at first accept three thousand six hundred, so as to rise gradually to a very big figure. But three thousand six hundred! How can one live on that in the meantime, especially now that this flat has increased our expenses?"

At this Valerie broke in impetuously: "'Nothing venture, nothing have!' That's what I keep on repeating to him. Of course I am in favor of prudence; I would never let him do anything rash which might compromise his future. But, at the same time, he can't moulder away in a situation unworthy of him."

"And so you have made up your minds?" asked Mathieu.

"Well, my wife has calculated everything," Morange replied; "and, yes, we have made up our minds, provided, of course, that nothing unforeseen occurs. Besides, it is only in October that any situation will be open at the Credit National. But, I say, my dear friend, keep the matter entirely to yourself, for we don't want to quarrel with the Beauchenes just now."

Then he looked at his watch, for, like a good clerk, he was very punctual, and did not wish to be late at the office. The servant was hurried, the coffee was served, and they were drinking it, boiling hot as it was, when the arrival of a visitor upset the little household and caused everything to be forgotten.

"Oh!" exclaimed Valerie, as she hastily rose, flushed with pride, "Madame la Baronne de Lowicz!"

Seraphine, at this time nine-and-twenty, was red-haired, tall and elegant, with magnificent shoulders which were known to all Paris. Her red lips were wreathed in a triumphant smile, and a voluptuous flame ever shone in her large brown eyes flecked with gold.

"Pray don't disturb yourselves, my friends," said she. "Your servant wanted to show me into the drawing-room, but I insisted

on coming in here, because it is rather a pressing matter. I have come to fetch your charming little Reine to take her to a matinee at the Circus."

A fresh explosion of delight ensued. The child remained speechless with joy, whilst the mother exulted and rattled on: "Oh! Madame la Baronne, you are really too kind! You are spoiling the child. But the fact is that she isn't dressed, and you will have to wait a moment. Come, child, make haste, I will help you – ten minutes, you understand – I won't keep you waiting a moment longer."

Seraphine remained alone with the two men. She had made a gesture of surprise on perceiving Mathieu, whose hand, like an old friend, she now shook.

"And you, are you quite well?" she asked.

"Quite well," he answered; and as she sat down near him he instinctively pushed his chair back. He did not seem at all pleased at having met her.

He had been on familiar terms with her during his earlier days at the Beauchene works. She was a frantic pleasure-lover, and destitute of both conscience and moral principles. Her conduct had given rise to scandal even before her extraordinary elopement with Baron de Lowicz, that needy adventurer with a face like an archangel's and the soul of a swindler. The result of the union was a stillborn child. Then Seraphine, who was extremely egotistical and avaricious, quarrelled with her husband and drove him away. He repaired to Berlin, and was killed there

in a brawl at a gambling den. Delighted at being rid of him, Seraphine made every use of her liberty as a young widow. She figured at every fete, took part in every kind of amusement, and many scandalous stories were told of her; but she contrived to keep up appearances and was thus still received everywhere.

"You are living in the country, are you not?" she asked again, turning towards Mathieu.

"Yes, we have been there for three weeks past."

"Constance told me of it. I met her the other day at Madame Seguin's. We are on the best terms possible, you know, now that I give my brother good advice."

In point of fact her sister-in-law, Constance, hated her, but with her usual boldness she treated the matter as a joke.

"We talked about Dr. Gaude," she resumed; "I fancied that she wanted to ask for his address; but she did not dare."

"Dr. Gaude!" interrupted Morange. "Ah! yes, a friend of my wife's spoke to her about him. He's a wonderfully clever man, it appears. Some of his operations are like miracles."

Then he went on talking of Dr. Gaude's clinic at the Hopital Marbeuf, a clinic whither society folks hastened to see operations performed, just as they might go to a theatre. The doctor, who was fond of money, and who bled his wealthy lady patients in more senses than one, was likewise partial to glory and proud of accomplishing the most dangerous experiments on the unhappy creatures who fell into his hands. The newspapers were always talking about him, his cures were constantly puffed and

advertised by way of inducing fine ladies to trust themselves to his skill. And he certainly accomplished wonders, cutting and carving his patients in the quietest, most unconcerned way possible, with never a scruple, never a doubt as to whether what he did was strictly right or not.

Seraphine had begun to laugh, showing her white wolfish teeth between her blood-red lips, when she noticed the horrified expression which had appeared on Mathieu's face since Gaude had been spoken of. "Ah!" said she; "there's a man, now, who in nowise resembles your squeamish Dr. Boutan, who is always prattling about the birth-rate. I can't understand why Constance keeps to that old-fashioned booby, holding the views she does. She is quite right, you know, in her opinions. I fully share them."

Morange laughed complaisantly. He wished to show her that his opinions were the same. However, as Valerie did not return with Reine, he grew impatient, and asked permission to go and see what they were about. Perhaps he himself might be able to help in getting the child ready.

As soon as Seraphine was alone with Mathieu she turned her big, ardent, gold-flecked eyes upon him. She no longer laughed with the same laugh as a moment previously; an expression of voluptuous irony appeared on her bold bad face. After a spell of silence she inquired, "And is my good cousin Marianne quite well?"

"Quite well," replied Mathieu.

"And the children are still growing?"

"Yes, still growing."

"So you are happy, like a good paterfamilias, in your little nook?"

"Perfectly happy."

Again she lapsed into silence, but she did not cease to look at him, more provoking, more radiant than ever, with the charm of a young sorceress whose eyes burn and poison men's hearts. And at last she slowly resumed: "And so it is all over between us?"

He made a gesture in token of assent. There had long since been a passing fancy between them. He had been nineteen at the time, and she two-and-twenty. He had then but just entered life, and she was already married. But a few months later he had fallen in love with Marianne, and had then entirely freed himself from her.

"All over – really?" she again inquired, smiling but aggressive.

She was looking very beautiful and bold, seeking to tempt him and carry him off from that silly little cousin of hers, whose tears would simply have made her laugh. And as Mathieu did not this time give her any answer, even by a wave of the hand, she went on: "I prefer that: don't reply: don't say that it is all over. You might make a mistake, you know."

For a moment Mathieu's eyes flashed, then he closed them in order that he might no longer see Seraphine, who was leaning towards him. It seemed as if all the past were coming back. She almost pressed her lips to his as she whispered that she still loved him; and when he drew back, full of mingled emotion and

annoyance, she raised her little hand to his mouth as if she feared that he was again going to say no.

"Be quiet," said she; "they are coming."

The Moranges were now indeed returning with Reine, whose hair had been curled. The child looked quite delicious in her frock of rose silk decked with white lace, and her large hat trimmed with some of the dress material. Her gay round face showed with flowery delicacy under the rose silk.

"Oh, what a love!" exclaimed Seraphine by way of pleasing the parents. "Somebody will be stealing her from me, you know."

Then it occurred to her to kiss the child in passionate fashion, feigning the emotion of a woman who regrets that she is childless. "Yes; indeed one regrets it very much when one sees such a treasure as this sweet girl of yours. Ah! if one could only be sure that God would give one such a charming child – well, at all events, I shall steal her from you; you need not expect me to bring her back again."

The enraptured Moranges laughed delightedly. And Mathieu, who knew her well, listened in stupefaction. How many times during their short and passionate attachment had she not inveighed against children! In her estimation maternity poisoned love, aged woman, and made a horror of her in the eyes of man.

The Moranges accompanied her and Reine to the landing. And they could not find words warm enough to express their happiness at seeing such coveted wealth and luxury come to seek their daughter. When the door of the flat was closed Valerie

darted on to the balcony, exclaiming, “Let us see them drive off.”

Morange, who no longer gave a thought to the office, took up a position near her, and called Mathieu and compelled him likewise to lean over and look down. A well-appointed victoria was waiting below with a superb-looking coachman motionless on the box-seat. This sight put a finishing touch to the excitement of the Moranges. When Seraphine had installed the little girl beside her, they laughed aloud.

“How pretty she looks! How happy she must feel!”

Reine must have been conscious that they were looking at her, for she raised her head, smiled and bowed. And Seraphine did the same, while the horse broke into a trot and turned the corner of the avenue. Then came a final explosion —

“Look at her!” repeated Valerie; “she is so candid! At twelve years old she is still as innocent as a child in her cradle. You know that I trust her to nobody. Wouldn’t one think her a little duchess who has always had a carriage of her own?”

Then Morange reverted to his dream of fortune. “Well,” said he, “I hope that she *will* have a carriage when we marry her off. Just let me get into the Credit National and you will see all your desires fulfilled.”

And turning towards Mathieu he added, “There are three of us, and, as I have said before, that is quite enough for a man to provide for, especially as money is so hard to earn.”

III

AT the works during the afternoon Mathieu, who wished to be free earlier than usual in order that, before dining in town, he might call upon his landlord, in accordance with his promise to Marianne, found himself so busy that he scarcely caught sight of Beauchene. This was a relief, for the secret which he had discovered by chance annoyed him, and he feared lest he might cause his employer embarrassment. But the latter, when they exchanged a few passing words, did not seem to remember even that there was any cause for shame on his part. He had never before shown himself more active, more devoted to business. The fatigue he had felt in the morning had passed away, and he talked and laughed like one who finds life very pleasant, and has no fear whatever of hard work.

As a rule Mathieu left at six o'clock; but that day he went into Morange's office at half-past five to receive his month's salary. This rightly amounted to three hundred and fifty francs; but as five hundred had been advanced to him in January, which he paid back by instalments of fifty, he now received only fifteen louis, and these he pocketed with such an air of satisfaction that the accountant commented on it.

"Well," said the young fellow, "the money's welcome, for I left my wife with just thirty sous this morning."

It was already more than six o'clock when he found himself

outside the superb house which the Seguin du Hordel family occupied in the Avenue d'Antin. Seguin's grandfather had been a mere tiller of the soil at Janville. Later on, his father, as a contractor for the army, had made a considerable fortune. And he, son of a parvenu, led the life of a rich, elegant idler. He was a member of the leading clubs, and, while passionately fond of horses, affected also a taste for art and literature, going for fashion's sake to extreme opinions. He had proudly married an almost portionless girl of a very ancient aristocratic race, the last of the Vaugelades, whose blood was poor and whose mind was narrow. Her mother, an ardent Catholic, had only succeeded in making of her one who, while following religious practices, was eager for the joys of the world. Seguin, since his marriage, had likewise practised religion, because it was fashionable to do so. His peasant grandfather had had ten children; his father, the army contractor, had been content with six; and he himself had two, a boy and a girl, and deemed even that number more than was right.

One part of Seguin's fortune consisted of an estate of some twelve hundred acres – woods and heaths – above Janville, which his father had purchased with some of his large gains after retiring from business. The old man's long-caressed dream had been to return in triumph to his native village, whence he had started quite poor, and he was on the point of there building himself a princely residence in the midst of a vast park when death snatched him away. Almost the whole of this estate had

come to Seguin in his share of the paternal inheritance, and he had turned the shooting rights to some account by dividing them into shares of five hundred francs value, which his friends eagerly purchased. The income derived from this source was, however, but a meagre one. Apart from the woods there was only uncultivated land on the estate, marshes, patches of sand, and fields of stones; and for centuries past the opinion of the district had been that no agriculturist could ever turn the expanse to good account. The defunct army contractor alone had been able to picture there a romantic park, such as he had dreamt of creating around his regal abode. It was he, by the way, who had obtained an authorization to add to the name of Seguin that of Du Hordel – taken from a ruined tower called the Hordel which stood on the estate.

It was through Beauchene, one of the shareholders of the shooting rights, that Mathieu had made Seguin's acquaintance, and had discovered the old hunting-box, the lonely, quiet pavilion, which had pleased him so much that he had rented it. Valentine, who good-naturedly treated Marianne as a poor friend, had even been amiable enough to visit her there, and had declared the situation of the place to be quite poetical, laughing the while over her previous ignorance of it like one who had known nothing of her property. In reality she herself would not have lived there for an hour. Her husband had launched her into the feverish life of literary, artistic, and social Paris, hurrying her to gatherings, studios, exhibitions, theatres, and

other pleasure resorts – all those brasier-like places where weak heads and wavering hearts are lost. He himself, amid all his passion for show, felt bored to death everywhere, and was at ease only among his horses; and this despite his pretensions with respect to advanced literature and philosophy, his collections of curios, such as the bourgeois of to-day does not yet understand, his furniture, his pottery, his pewter-work, and particularly his bookbindings, of which he was very proud. And he was turning his wife into a copy of himself, perverting her by his extravagant opinions and his promiscuous friendships, so that the little devotee who had been confided to his keeping was now on the high road to every kind of folly. She still went to mass and partook of the holy communion; but she was each day growing more and more familiar with wrong-doing. A disaster must surely be at the end of it all, particularly as he foolishly behaved to her in a rough, jeering way, which greatly hurt her feelings, and led her to dream of being loved with gentleness.

When Mathieu entered the house, which displayed eight lofty windows on each of the stories of its ornate Renaissance facade, he laughed lightly as he thought: "These folks don't have to wait for a monthly pittance of three hundred francs, with just thirty sous in hand."

The hall was extremely rich, all bronze and marble. On the right hand were the dining-room and two drawing-rooms; on the left a billiard-room, a smoking-room, and a winter garden. On the first floor, in front of the broad staircase, was Seguin's

so-called "cabinet," a vast apartment, sixteen feet high, forty feet long, and six-and-twenty feet wide, which occupied all the central part of the house; while the husband's bed and dressing rooms were on the right, and those of the wife and children on the left hand. Up above, on the second floor, two complete suites of rooms were kept in reserve for the time when the children should have grown up.

A footman, who knew Mathieu, at once took him upstairs to the cabinet and begged him to wait there, while Monsieur finished dressing. For a moment the visitor fancied himself alone and glanced round the spacious room, feeling interested in its adornments, the lofty windows of old stained glass, the hangings of old Genoese velvet and brocaded silk, the oak bookcases showing the highly ornamented backs of the volumes they contained; the tables laden with bibelots, bronzes, marbles, goldsmith's work, glass work, and the famous collection of modern pewter-work. Then Eastern carpets were spread out upon all sides; there were low seats and couches for every mood of idleness, and cosy nooks in which one could hide oneself behind fringes of lofty plants.

"Oh! so it's you, Monsieur Froment," suddenly exclaimed somebody in the direction of the table allotted to the pewter curios. And thereupon a tall young man of thirty, whom a screen had hitherto hidden from Mathieu's view, came forward with outstretched hand.

"Ah!" said Mathieu, after a moment's hesitation, "Monsieur

Charles Santerre."

This was but their second meeting. They had found themselves together once before in that same room. Charles Santerre, already famous as a novelist, a young master popular in Parisian drawing-rooms, had a fine brow, caressing brown eyes, and a large red mouth which his moustache and beard, cut in the Assyrian style and carefully curled, helped to conceal. He had made his way, thanks to women, whose society he sought under pretext of studying them, but whom he was resolved to use as instruments of fortune. As a matter of calculation and principle he had remained a bachelor and generally installed himself in the nests of others. In literature feminine frailty was his stock subject he had made it his specialty to depict scenes of guilty love amid elegant, refined surroundings. At first he had no illusions as to the literary value of his works; he had simply chosen, in a deliberate way, what he deemed to be a pleasant and lucrative trade. But, duped by his successes, he had allowed pride to persuade him that he was really a writer. And nowadays he posed as the painter of an expiring society, professing the greatest pessimism, and basing a new religion on the annihilation of human passion, which annihilation would insure the final happiness of the world.

"Seguin will be here in a moment," he resumed in an amiable way. "It occurred to me to take him and his wife to dine at a restaurant this evening, before going to a certain first performance where there will probably be some fisticuffs and a rumpus to-night."

Mathieu then for the first time noticed that Santerre was in evening dress. They continued chatting for a moment, and the novelist called attention to a new pewter treasure among Seguin's collection. It represented a long, thin woman, stretched full-length, with her hair streaming around her. She seemed to be sobbing as she lay there, and Santerre declared the conception to be a masterpiece. The figure symbolized the end of woman, reduced to despair and solitude when man should finally have made up his mind to have nothing further to do with her. It was the novelist who, in literary and artistic matters, helped on the insanity which was gradually springing up in the Seguins' home.

However, Seguin himself now made his appearance. He was of the same age as Santerre, but was taller and slimmer, with fair hair, an aquiline nose, gray eyes, and thin lips shaded by a slight moustache. He also was in evening dress.

"Ah! well, my dear fellow," said he with the slight lisp which he affected, "Valentine is determined to put on a new gown. So we must be patient; we shall have an hour to wait."

Then, on catching sight of Mathieu, he began to apologize, evincing much politeness and striving to accentuate his air of frigid distinction. When the young man, whom he called his amiable tenant, had acquainted him with the motive of his visit – the leak in the zinc roof of the little pavilion at Janville – he at once consented to let the local plumber do any necessary soldering. But when, after fresh explanations, he understood that the roofing was so worn and damaged that it required to be

changed entirely, he suddenly departed from his lofty affability and began to protest, declaring that he could not possibly expend in such repairs a sum which would exceed the whole annual rental of six hundred francs.

"Some soldering," he repeated; "some soldering; it's understood. I will write to the plumber." And wishing to change the subject he added: "Oh! wait a moment, Monsieur Froment. You are a man of taste, I know, and I want to show you a marvel."

He really had some esteem for Mathieu, for he knew that the young fellow possessed a quick appreciative mind. Mathieu began to smile, outwardly yielding to this attempt to create a diversion, but determined at heart that he would not leave the place until he had obtained the promise of a new roof. He took hold of a book, clad in a marvellous binding, which Seguin had fetched from a bookcase and tendered with religious care. On the cover of soft snow-white leather was incrusted a long silver lily, intersected by a tuft of big violet thistles. The title of the work, "Beauty Imperishable," was engraved up above, as in a corner of the sky.

"Ah! what a delightful conception, what delightful coloring!" declared Mathieu, who was really charmed. "Some bindings nowadays are perfect gems." Then he noticed the title: "Why, it's Monsieur Santerre's last novel!" said he.

Seguin smiled and glanced at the writer, who had drawn near. And when he saw him examining the book and looking quite moved by the compliment paid to it, he exclaimed: "My

dear fellow, the binder brought it here this morning, and I was awaiting an opportunity to surprise you with it. It is the pearl of my collection! What do you think of the idea – that lily which symbolizes triumphant purity, and those thistles, the plants which spring up among ruins, and which symbolize the sterility of the world, at last deserted, again won over to the only perfect felicity? All your work lies in those symbols, you know."

"Yes, yes. But you spoil me; you will end by making me proud."

Mathieu had read Santerre's novel, having borrowed a copy of it from Mme. Beauchene, in order that his wife might see it, since it was a book that everybody was talking of. And the perusal of it had exasperated him. Forsaking the customary bachelor's flat where in previous works he had been so fond of laying scenes of debauchery, Santerre had this time tried to rise to the level of pure art and lyrical symbolism. The story he told was one of a certain Countess Anne-Marie, who, to escape a rough-mannered husband of extreme masculinity, had sought a refuge in Brittany in the company of a young painter endowed with divine inspiration, one Norbert, who had undertaken to decorate a convent chapel with paintings that depicted his various visions. And for thirty years he went on painting there, ever in colloquy with the angels, and ever having Anne-Marie beside him. And during those thirty years of love the Countess's beauty remained unimpaired; she was as young and as fresh at the finish as at the outset; whereas certain secondary personages, introduced

into the story, wives and mothers of a neighboring little town, sank into physical and mental decay, and monstrous decrepitude. Mathieu considered the author's theory that all physical beauty and moral nobility belonged to virgins only, to be thoroughly imbecile, and he could not restrain himself from hinting his disapproval of it.

Both Santerre and Seguin, however, hotly opposed him, and quite a discussion ensued. First Santerre took up the matter from a religious standpoint. Said he, the words of the Old Testament, "Increase and multiply," were not to be found in the New Testament, which was the true basis of the Christian religion. The first Christians, he declared, had held marriage in horror, and with them the Holy Virgin had become the ideal of womanhood. Seguin thereupon nodded approval and proceeded to give his opinions on feminine beauty. But these were hardly to the taste of Mathieu, who promptly pointed out that the conception of beauty had often varied.

"To-day," said he, "you conceive beauty to consist in a long, slim, attenuated, almost angular figure; but at the time of the Renaissance the type of the beautiful was very different. Take Rubens, take Titian, take even Raffaelle, and you will see that their women were of robust build. Even their Virgin Marys have a motherly air. To my thinking, moreover, if we reverted to some such natural type of beauty, if women were not encouraged by fashion to compress and attenuate their figures so that their very nature, their very organism is changed, there would perhaps

be some hope of coping with the evil of depopulation which is talked about so much nowadays."

The others looked at him and smiled with an air of compassionate superiority. "Depopulation an evil!" exclaimed Seguin; "can you, my dear sir, intelligent as you are, still believe in that hackneyed old story? Come, reflect and reason a little."

Then Santerre chimed in, and they went on talking one after the other and at times both together. Schopenhauer and Hartmann and Nietzsche were passed in review, and they claimed Malthus as one of themselves. But all this literary pessimism did not trouble Mathieu. He, with his belief in fruitfulness, remained convinced that the nation which no longer had faith in life must be dangerously ill. True, there were hours when he doubted the expediency of numerous families and asked himself if ten thousand happy people were not preferable to a hundred thousand unhappy ones; in which connection political and economic conditions had to be taken into account. But when all was said, he remained almost convinced that the Malthusian hypotheses would prove as false in the future as they had proved false in the past.

"Moreover," said he, "even if the world should become densely populated, even if food supplies, such as we know them, should fall short, chemistry would extract other means of subsistence from inorganic matter. And, besides, all such eventualities are so far away that it is impossible to make any calculation on a basis of scientific certainty. In France,

too, instead of contributing to any such danger, we are going backward, we are marching towards annihilation. The population of France was once a fourth of the population of Europe, but now it is only one-eighth. In a century or two Paris will be dead, like ancient Athens and ancient Rome, and we shall have fallen to the rank that Greece now occupies. Paris seems determined to die."

But Santerre protested: "No, no; Paris simply wishes to remain stationary, and it wishes this precisely because it is the most intelligent, most highly civilized city in the world. The more nations advance in civilization the smaller becomes their birth-rate. We are simply giving the world an example of high culture, superior intelligence, and other nations will certainly follow that example when in turn they also attain to our state of perfection. There are signs of this already on every side."

"Quite so!" exclaimed Seguin, backing up his friend. "The phenomenon is general; all the nations show the same symptoms, and are decreasing in numbers, or will decrease as soon as they become civilized. Japan is affected already, and the same will be the case with China as soon as Europe forces open the door there."

Mathieu had become grave and attentive since the two society men, seated before him in evening dress, had begun to talk more rationally. The pale, slim, flat virgin, their ideal of feminine beauty, was no longer in question. The history of mankind was passing by. And almost as if communing with himself, he said: "So you do not fear the Yellow Peril, that terrible swarming of

Asiatic barbarians who, it was said, would at some fatal moment sweep down on our Europe, ravage it, and people it afresh? In past ages, history always began anew in that fashion, by the sudden shifting of oceans, the invasion of fierce rough races coming to endow weakened nations with new blood. And after each such occurrence civilization flowered afresh, more broadly and freely than ever. How was it that Babylon, Nineveh, and Memphis fell into dust with their populations, who seem to have died on the spot? How is it that Athens and Rome still agonize to-day, unable to spring afresh from their ashes and renew the splendor of their ancient glory? How is it that death has already laid its hand upon Paris, which, whatever her splendor, is but the capital of a France whose virility is weakened? You may argue as you please and say that, like the ancient capitals of the world, Paris is dying of an excess of culture, intelligence, and civilization; it is none the less a fact that she is approaching death, the turn of the tide which will carry splendor and power to some new nation. Your theory of equilibrium is wrong. Nothing can remain stationary; whatever ceases to grow, decreases and disappears. And if Paris is bent on dying, she will die, and the country with her."

"Well, for my part," declared Santerre, resuming the pose of an elegant pessimist, "if she wishes to die, I shan't oppose her. In fact, I'm fully determined to help her."

"It is evident that the really honest, sensible course is to check any increase of population," added Seguin.

But Mathieu, as if he had not heard them, went on: "I know Herbert Spencer's law, and I believe it to be theoretically correct. It is certain that civilization is a check to fruitfulness, so that one may picture a series of social evolutions conducing now to decrease and now to increase of population, the whole ending in final equilibrium, by the very effect of culture's victory when the world shall be entirely populated and civilized. But who can foretell what road will be followed, through what disasters and sufferings one may have to go? More and more nations may disappear, and others may replace them; and how many thousands of years may not be needed before the final adjustment, compounded of truth, justice, and peace, is arrived at? At the thought of this the mind trembles and hesitates, and the heart contracts with a pang."

Deep silence fell while he thus remained disturbed, shaken in his faith in the good powers of life, and at a loss as to who was right – he or those two men so languidly stretched out before him.

But Valentine, Seguin's wife, came in, laughing and making an exhibition of masculine ways, which it had cost her much trouble to acquire.

"Ah! you people; you must not bear me any malice, you know. That girl Celeste takes such a time over everything!"

At five-and-twenty Valentine was short, slight, and still girlish. Fair, with a delicate face, laughing blue eyes, and a pert little nose, she could not claim to be pretty. Still she was charming and droll, and very free and easy in her ways; for not only did

her husband take her about with him to all sorts of objectionable places, but she had become quite familiar with the artists and writers who frequented the house. Thus it was only in the presence of something extremely insulting that she again showed herself the last of the Vaugelades, and would all at once draw herself up and display haughty contempt and frigidity.

"Ah! it's you, Monsieur Froment," she said amiably, stepping towards Mathieu and shaking his hand in cavalier fashion. "Is Madame Froment in good health? Are the children flourishing as usual?"

Seguin was examining her dress, a gown of white silk trimmed with unbleached lace, and he suddenly gave way to one of those horribly rude fits which burst forth at times amid all his great affectation of politeness. "What! have you kept us waiting all this time to put that rag on? Well, you never looked a greater fright in your life!"

And she had entered the room convinced that she looked charming! She made an effort to control herself, but her girlish face darkened and assumed an expression of haughty, vindictive revolt. Then she slowly turned her eyes towards the friend who was present, and who was gazing at her with ecstasy, striving to accentuate the slavish submissiveness of his attitude.

"You look delicious!" he murmured; "that gown is a marvel."

Seguin laughed and twitted Santerre on his obsequiousness towards women. Valentine, mollified by the compliment, soon recovered her birdlike gayety, and such free and easy

conversation ensued between the trio that Mathieu felt both stupefied and embarrassed. In fact, he would have gone off at once had it not been for his desire to obtain from his landlord a promise to repair the pavilion properly.

"Wait another moment," Valentine at last said to her husband; "I told Celeste to bring the children, so that we might kiss them before starting."

Mathieu wished to profit by this fresh delay, and sought to renew his request; but Valentine was already rattling on again, talking of dining at the most disreputable restaurant possible, and asking if at the first performance which they were to attend they would see all the horrors which had been hissed at the dress rehearsal the night before. She appeared like a pupil of the two men between whom she stood. She even went further in her opinions than they did, displaying the wildest pessimism, and such extreme views on literature and art that they themselves could not forbear laughing. Wagner was greatly over-estimated, in her opinion; she asked for invertebrate music, the free harmony of the passing wind. As for her moral views, they were enough to make one shudder. She had got past the argumentative amours of Ibsen's idiotic, rebellious heroines, and had now reached the theory of pure intangible beauty. She deemed Santerre's last creation, Anne-Marie, to be far too material and degraded, because in one deplorable passage the author remarked that Norbert's kisses had left their trace on the Countess's brow. Santerre disputed the quotation, whereupon she

rushed upon the volume and sought the page to which she had referred.

"But I never degraded her," exclaimed the novelist in despair. "She never has a child."

"Pooh! What of that?" exclaimed Valentine. "If Anne-Marie is to raise our hearts she ought to be like spotless marble, and Norbert's kisses should leave no mark upon her."

But she was interrupted, for Celeste, the maid, a tall dark girl with an equine head, big features, and a pleasant air, now came in with the two children. Gaston was at this time five years old, and Lucie was three. Both were slight and delicate, pale like roses blooming in the shade. Like their mother, they were fair. The lad's hair was inclined to be carroty, while that of the girl suggested the color of oats. And they also had their mother's blue eyes, but their faces were elongated like that of their father. Dressed in white, with their locks curled, arrayed indeed in the most coquettish style, they looked like big fragile dolls. The parents were touched in their worldly pride at sight of them, and insisted on their playing their parts with due propriety.

"Well, don't you wish anybody good evening?"

The children were not timid; they were already used to society and looked visitors full in the face. If they made little haste, it was because they were naturally indolent and did not care to obey. They at last made up their minds and allowed themselves to be kissed.

"Good evening, good friend Santerre."

Then they hesitated before Mathieu, and their father had to remind them of the gentleman's name, though they had already seen him on two or three occasions.

"Good evening, Monsieur Froment."

Valentine took hold of them, sat them on her lap, and half stifled them with caresses. She seemed to adore them, but as soon as she had sat them down again she forgot all about them.

"So you are going out again, mamma?" asked the little boy.

"Why, yes, my darling. Papas and mammas, you know, have their affairs to see to."

"So we shall have dinner all alone, mamma?"

Valentine did not answer, but turned towards the maid, who was waiting for orders; —

"You are not to leave them for a moment, Celeste – you hear? And, above all things, they are not to go into the kitchen. I can never come home without finding them in the kitchen. It is exasperating. Let them have their dinner at seven, and put them to bed at nine. And see that they go to sleep."

The big girl with the equine head listened with an air of respectful obedience, while her faint smile expressed the cunning of a Norman peasant who had been five years in Paris already and was hardened to service, and well knew what was done with children when the master and mistress were absent.

"Madame," she said in a simple way, "Mademoiselle Lucie is poorly. She has been sick again."

"What? sick again!" cried the father in a fury. "I am always

hearing of that! They are always being sick! And it always happens when we are going out! It is very disagreeable, my dear; you might see to it; you ought not to let our children have papier-mache stomachs!"

The mother made an angry gesture, as if to say that she could not help it. As a matter of fact, the children were often poorly. They had experienced every childish ailment, they were always catching cold or getting feverish. And they preserved the mute, moody, and somewhat anxious demeanor of children who are abandoned to the care of servants.

"Is it true you were poorly, my little Lucie?" asked Valentine, stooping down to the child. "You aren't poorly now, are you? No, no, it's nothing, nothing at all. Kiss me, my pet; bid papa good night very prettily, so that he may not feel worried in leaving you."

She rose up, already tranquillized and gay again; and, noticing that Mathieu was looking at her, she exclaimed:

"Ah! these little folks give one a deal of worry. But one loves them dearly all the same, though, so far as there is happiness in life, it would perhaps be better for them never to have been born. However, my duty to the country is done. Each wife ought to have a boy and a girl as I have."

Thereupon Mathieu, seeing that she was jesting, ventured to say with a laugh:

"Well, that isn't the opinion of your medical man, Dr. Boutan. He declares that to make the country prosperous every married

couple ought to have four children."

"Four children! He's mad!" cried Seguin. And again with the greatest freedom of language he brought forward his pet theories. There was a world of meaning in his wife's laughter while Celeste stood there unmoved and the children listened without understanding. But at last Santerre led the Seguins away. It was only in the hall that Mathieu obtained from his landlord a promise that he would write to the plumber at Janville and that the roof of the pavilion should be entirely renovated, since the rain came into the bedrooms.

The Seguins' landau was waiting at the door. When they had got into it with their friend, it occurred to Mathieu to raise his eyes; and at one of the windows he perceived Celeste standing between the two children, intent, no doubt, on assuring herself that Monsieur and Madame were really going. The young man recalled Reine's departure from her parents; but here both Lucie and Gaston remained motionless, gravely mournful, and neither their father nor their mother once thought of looking up at them.

IV

AT half-past seven o'clock, when Mathieu arrived at the restaurant on the Place de la Madeleine where he was to meet his employer, he found him already there, drinking a glass of madeira with his customer, M. Firon-Badinier. The dinner was a remarkable one; choice viands and the best wines were served in abundance. But Mathieu was struck less by the appetite which the others displayed than by Beauchene's activity and skill. Glass in hand, never losing a bite, he had already persuaded his customer, by the time the roast arrived, to order not only the new thresher but also a mowing machine. M. Firon-Badinier was to take the train for Evreux at nine-twenty, and when nine o'clock struck, the other, now eager to be rid of him, contrived to pack him off in a cab to the St. – Lazare railway station.

For a moment Beauchene remained standing on the pavement with Mathieu, and took off his hat in order that the mild breezes of that delightful May evening might cool his burning head.

"Well, that's settled," he said with a laugh. "But it wasn't so easily managed. It was the Pommard which induced the beggar to make up his mind. All the same, I was dreadfully afraid he would make me miss my appointment."

These remarks, which escaped him amid his semi-intoxication, led him to more confidential talk. He put on his hat again, lighted a fresh cigar, and took Mathieu's arm. Then

they walked on slowly through the passion-stirred throng and the nightly blaze of the Boulevards.

"There's plenty of time," said Beauchene. "I'm not expected till half-past nine, and it's close by. Will you have a cigar? No? You never smoke?"

"Never."

"Well, my dear fellow, it would be ridiculous to feign with you, since you happened to see me this morning. Oh, it's a stupid affair! I'm quite of that opinion; but, then, what would you have?"

Thereupon he launched out into long explanations concerning his marital life and the intrigue which had suddenly sprung up between him and that girl Norine, old Moineaud's daughter. He professed the greatest respect for his wife, but he was nevertheless a loose liver; and Constance was now beginning to resign herself to the inevitable. She closed her eyes when it would have been unpleasant for her to keep them open. She knew very well that it was essential that the business should be kept together and pass intact into the hands of their son Maurice. A tribe of children would have meant the ruin of all their plans.

Mathieu listened at first in great astonishment, and then began to ask questions and raise objections, at most of which Beauchene laughed gayly, like the gross egotist he was. He talked at length with extreme volubility, going into all sorts of details, at times assuming a semi-apologetic manner, but more frequently justifying himself with an air of triumph. And, finally, when they reached the corner of the Rue Caumartin he halted to bid

Mathieu good-by. He there had a little bachelor's lodging, which was kept in order by the concierge of the house, who, being very well paid, proved an extremely discreet domestic.

As he hurried off, Mathieu, still standing at the corner of the street, could not help thinking of the scenes which he had witnessed at the Beauchene works that day. He thought of old Moineaud, the fitter, whom he again saw standing silent and unmoved in the women's workroom while his daughter Euphrasie was being soundly rated by Beauchene, and while Norine, the other girl, looked on with a sly laugh. When the toiler's children have grown up and gone to join, the lads the army of slaughter, and the girls the army of vice, the father, degraded by the ills of life, pays little heed to it all. To him it is seemingly a matter of indifference to what disaster the wind may carry the fledgelings who fall from the nest.

It was now half-past nine o'clock, and Mathieu had more than an hour before him to reach the Northern railway station. So he did not hurry, but strolled very leisurely up the Boulevards. He had eaten and drunk far more than usual, and Beauchene's insidious confidential talk, still buzzing in his ears, helped on his intoxication. His hands were hot, and now and again a sudden glow passed over his face. And what a warm evening it was, too, on those Boulevards, blazing with electric lights, fevered by a swarming, jostling throng, amid a ceaseless rumble of cabs and omnibuses! It was all like a stream of ardent life flowing away into the night, and Mathieu allowed himself to be carried on by

the torrent, whose hot breath, whose glow of passion, he ever felt sweeping over him.

Then, in a reverie, he pictured the day he had just spent. First he was at the Beauchenes' in the morning, and saw the father and mother standing, like accomplices who fully shared one another's views, beside the sofa on which Maurice, their only son, lay dozing with a pale and waxen face. The works must never be exposed to the danger of being subdivided. Maurice alone must inherit all the millions which the business might yield, so that he might become one of the princes of industry. And therefore the husband hurried off to sin while the wife closed her eyes. In this sense, in defiance of morality and health, did the capitalist bourgeoisie, which had replaced the old nobility, virtually re-establish the law of primogeniture. That law had been abolished at the Revolution for the bourgeoisie's benefit; but now, also for its own purposes, it revived it. Each family must have but one son.

Mathieu had reached this stage in his reflections when his thoughts were diverted by several street hawkers who, in selling the last edition of an evening print, announced a "drawing" of the lottery stock of some enterprise launched by the Credit National. And then he suddenly recalled the Moranges in their dining-room, and heard them recapitulate their dream of making a big fortune as soon as the accountant should have secured a post in one of the big banking establishments, where the principals raise men of value to the highest posts. Those Moranges lived in everlasting dread of seeing their daughter marry a needy petty

clerk; succumbing to that irresistible fever which, in a democracy ravaged by political equality and economic inequality, impels every one to climb higher up the social ladder. Envy consumed them at the thought of the luxury of others; they plunged into debt in order that they might imitate from afar the elegance of the upper class, and all their natural honesty and good nature was poisoned by the insanity born of ambitious pride. And here again but one child was permissible, lest they should be embarrassed, delayed, forever impeded in the attainment of the future they coveted.

A crowd of people now barred Mathieu's way, and he perceived that he was near the theatre, where a first performance was taking place that evening. It was a theatre where free farcical pieces were produced, and on its walls were posted huge portraits of its "star," a carroty wench with a long flat figure, destitute of all womanliness, and seemingly symbolical of perversity. Passers-by stopped to gaze at the bills, the vilest remarks were heard, and Mathieu remembered that the Seguins and Santerre were inside the house, laughing at the piece, which was of so filthy a nature that the spectators at the dress rehearsal, though they were by no means over-nice in such matters, had expressed their disgust by almost wrecking the auditorium. And while the Seguins were gloating over this horror, yonder, at their house in the Avenue d'Antin, Celeste had just put the children, Gaston and Lucie, to bed, and had then hastily returned to the kitchen, where a friend, Madame Menoux, who kept a little haberdasher's shop

in the neighborhood, awaited her. Gaston, having been given some wine to drink, was already asleep; but Lucie, who again felt sick, lay shivering in her bed, not daring to call Celeste, lest the servant, who did not like to be disturbed, should ill-treat her. And, at two o'clock in the morning, after offering Santerre an oyster supper at a night restaurant, the Seguins would come home, their minds unhinged by the imbecile literature and art to which they had taken for fashion's sake, vitiated yet more by the ignoble performance they had witnessed, and the base society they had elbowed at supper. They seemed to typify vice for vice's sake, elegant vice and pessimism as a principle.

Indeed, when Mathieu tried to sum up his day, he found vice on every side, in each of the spheres with which he had come in contact. And now the examples he had witnessed filled him no longer with mere surprise; they disturbed him, they shook his beliefs, they made him doubt whether his notions of life, duty, and happiness might not after all be inaccurate.

He stopped short and drew a long breath, seeking to drive away his growing intoxication. He had passed the Grand Opera and was reaching the crossway of the Rue Drouot. Perhaps his increase of fever was due to those glowing Boulevards. The private rooms of the restaurants were still ablaze, the cafes threw bright radiance across the road, the pavement was blocked by their tables and chairs and customers. All Paris seemed to have come down thither to enjoy that delightful evening. There was endless elbowing, endless mingling of breath as the swelling

crowd sauntered along. Couples lingered before the sparkling displays of jewellers' shops. Middle-class families swept under dazzling arches of electric lamps into cafes concerts, whose huge posters promised the grossest amusements. Hundreds and hundreds of women went by with trailing skirts, and whispered and jested and laughed; while men darted in pursuit, now of a fair chignon, now of a dark one. In the open cabs men and women sat side by side, now husbands and wives long since married, now chance couples who had met but an hour ago. But Mathieu went on again, yielding to the force of the current, carried along like all the others, a prey to the same fever which sprang from the surroundings, from the excitement of the day, from the customs of the age. And he no longer took the Beauchenes, the Moranges, the Seguins as isolated types; it was all Paris that symbolized vice, all Paris that yielded to debauchery and sank into degradation. There were the folks of high culture, the folks suffering from literary neurosis; there were the merchant princes; there were the men of liberal professions, the lawyers, the doctors, the engineers; there were the people of the lower middle-class, the petty tradesmen, the petty clerks; there were even the manual workers, poisoned by the example of the upper spheres – all practising the doctrines of egotism as vanity and the passion for money grew more and more intense… No more children! Paris was bent on dying. And Mathieu recalled how Napoleon I., one evening after battle, on beholding a plain strewn with the corpses of his soldiers, had put his trust in Paris to repair the carnage of

that day. But times had changed. Paris would no longer supply life, whether it were for slaughter or for toil.

And as Mathieu thought of it all a sudden weakness came upon him. Again he asked himself whether the Beauchenes, the Moranges, the Seguins, and all those thousands and thousands around him were not right, and whether he were not the fool, the dupe, the criminal, with his belief in life ever renascent, ever growing and spreading throughout the world. And before him arose, too, the image of Seraphine, the temptress, opening her perfumed arms to him and carrying him off to the same existence of pleasure and baseness which the others led.

Then he remembered the three hundred francs which he carried in his pocket. Three hundred francs, which must last for a whole month, though out of them he had to pay various little sums that he already owed. The remainder would barely suffice to buy a ribbon for Marianne and jam for the youngsters' bread. And if he set the Moranges on one side, the others, the Beauchenes and the Seguins, were rich. He bitterly recalled their wealth. He pictured the rumbling factory with its black buildings covering a great stretch of ground; he pictured hundreds of workmen ever increasing the fortune of their master, who dwelt in a handsomely appointed pavilion and whose only son was growing up for future sovereignty, under his mother's vigilant eyes. He pictured, too, the Seguins' luxurious mansion in the Avenue d'Antin, the great hall, the magnificent staircase, the vast room above, crowded with marvels; he pictured all the

refinement, all the train of wealth, all the tokens of lavish life, the big dowry which would be given to the little girl, the high position which would be purchased for the son. And he, bare and empty-handed, who now possessed nothing, not even a stone at the edge of a field, would doubtless always possess nothing, neither factory buzzing with workmen, nor mansion rearing its proud front aloft. And he was the imprudent one, and the others were the sensible, the wise. What would ever become of himself and his troop of children? Would he not die in some garret? would they not lead lives of abject wretchedness? Ah! it was evident the others were right, the others were sensible. And he felt unhinged, he regarded himself with contempt, like a fool who has allowed himself to be duped.

Then once more the image of Seraphine arose before his eyes, more tempting than ever. A slight quiver came upon him as he beheld the blaze of the Northern railway station and all the feverish traffic around it. Wild fancies surged through his brain. He thought of Beauchene. Why should he not do likewise? He recalled past times, and, yielding to sudden madness, turned his back upon the station and retraced his steps towards the Boulevards. Seraphine, he said to himself, was doubtless waiting for him; she had told him that he would always be welcome. As for his wife, he would tell her he had missed his train.

At last a block in the traffic made him pause, and on raising his eyes he saw that he had reached the Boulevards once more. The crowd still streamed along, but with increased feverishness.

Mathieu's temples were beating, and wild words escaped his lips. Why should he not live the same life as the others? He was ready, even eager, to plunge into it. But the block in the traffic continued, he could not cross the road; and while he stood there hesitation and doubt came upon him. He saw in that increasing obstruction a deliberate obstacle to his wild design. And all at once the image of Seraphine faded from before his mind's eye and he beheld another, his wife, his dear wife Marianne, awaiting him, all smiles and trustfulness, in the fresh quietude of the country. Could he deceive her? … Then all at once he again rushed off towards the railway station, in fear lest he should lose his train. He was determined that he would listen to no further promptings, that he would cast no further glance upon glowing, dissolute Paris, and he reached the station just in time to climb into a car. The train started and he journeyed on, leaning out of his compartment and offering his face to the cool night breeze in order that it might calm and carry off the evil fever that had possessed him.

The night was moonless, but studded with such pure and such glowing stars that the country could be seen spreading far away beneath a soft bluish radiance. Already at twenty minutes past eleven Marianne found herself on the little bridge crossing the Yeuse, midway between Chantebled, the pavilion where she and her husband lived, and the station of Janville. The children were fast asleep; she had left them in the charge of Zoe, the servant, who sat knitting beside a lamp, the light of which could be seen

from afar, showing like a bright spark amid the black line of the woods.

Whenever Mathieu returned home by the seven o'clock train, as was his wont, Marianne came to meet him at the bridge. Occasionally she brought her two eldest boys, the twins, with her, though their little legs moved but slowly on the return journey when, in retracing their steps, a thousand yards or more, they had to climb a rather steep hillside. And that evening, late though the hour was, Marianne had yielded to that pleasant habit of hers, enjoying the delight of thus going forward through the lovely night to meet the man she worshipped. She never went further than the bridge which arched over the narrow river. She seated herself on its broad, low parapet, as on some rustic bench, and thence she overlooked the whole plain as far as the houses of Janville, before which passed the railway line. And from afar she could see her husband approaching along the road which wound between the cornfields.

That evening she took her usual seat under the broad velvety sky spangled with gold. And with a movement which bespoke her solicitude she turned towards the bright little light shining on the verge of the sombre woods, a light telling of the quietude of the room in which it burnt, the servant's tranquil vigil, and the happy slumber of the children in the adjoining chamber. Then Marianne let her gaze wander all around her, over the great estate of Chantebled, belonging to the Seguins. The dilapidated pavilion stood at the extreme edge of the woods whose copses, intersected

by patches of heath, spread over a lofty plateau to the distant farms of Mareuil and Lillebonne. But that was not all, for to the west of the plateau lay more than two hundred and fifty acres of land, a marshy expanse where pools stagnated amid brushwood, vast uncultivated tracts, where one went duck-shooting in winter. And there was yet a third part of the estate, acres upon acres of equally sterile soil, all sand and gravel, descending in a gentle slope to the embankment of the railway line. It was indeed a stretch of country lost to culture, where the few good patches of loam remained unproductive, inclosed within the waste land. But the spot had all the beauty and exquisite wildness of solitude, and was one that appealed to healthy minds fond of seeing nature in freedom. And on that lovely night one could nowhere have found more perfect and more balmy quiet.

Marianne, who since coming to the district had already threaded the woodland paths, explored the stretches of brushwood around the meres, and descended the pebbly slopes, let her eyes travel slowly over the expanse, divining spots she had visited and was fond of, though the darkness now prevented her from seeing them. In the depths of the woods an owl raised its soft, regular cry, while from a pond on the right ascended a faint croaking of frogs, so far away that it sounded like the vibration of crystal. And from the other side, the side of Paris, there came a growing rumble which, little by little, rose above all the other sounds of the night. She heard it, and at last lent ear to nothing else. It was the train, for whose familiar roar she

waited every evening. As soon as it left Monval station on its way to Janville, it gave token of its coming, but so faintly that only a practised ear could distinguish its rumble amid the other sounds rising from the country side. For her part, she heard it immediately, and thereupon followed it in fancy through every phase of its journey. And never had she been better able to do so than on that splendid night, amid the profound quietude of the earth's slumber. It had left Monval, it was turning beside the brickworks, it was skirting St. George's fields. In another two minutes it would be at Janville. Then all at once its white light shone out beyond the poplar trees of Le Mesnil Rouge, and the panting of the engine grew louder, like that of some giant racer drawing near. On that side the plain spread far away into a dark, unknown region, beneath the star-spangled sky, which on the very horizon showed a ruddy reflection like that of some brasier, the reflection of nocturnal Paris, blazing and smoking in the darkness like a volcano.

Marianne sprang to her feet. The train stopped at Janville, and then its rumble rose again, grew fainter, and died away in the direction of Vieux-Bourg. But she no longer paid attention to it. She now had eyes and ears only for the road which wound like a pale ribbon between the dark patches of corn. Her husband did not take ten minutes to cover the thousand yards and more which separated the station from the little bridge. And, as a rule, she perceived and recognized him far off; but on that particular night, such was the deep silence that she could distinguish his footfall

on the echoing road long before his dark, slim figure showed against the pale ground. And he found her there, erect under the stars, smiling and healthy, a picture of all that is good. The milky whiteness of her skin was accentuated by her beautiful black hair, caught up in a huge coil, and her big black eyes, which beamed with all the gentleness of spouse and mother. Her straight brow, her nose, her mouth, her chin so boldly, purely rounded, her cheeks which glowed like savory fruit, her delightful little ears – the whole of her face, full of love and tenderness, bespoke beauty in full health, the gayety which comes from the accomplishment of duty, and the serene conviction that by loving life she would live as she ought to live.

"What! so you've come then!" Mathieu exclaimed, as soon as he was near her. "But I begged you not to come out so late. Are you not afraid at being alone on the roads at this time of night?"

She began to laugh. "Afraid," said she, "when the night is so mild and healthful? Besides, wouldn't you rather have me here to kiss you ten minutes sooner?"

Those simple words brought tears to Mathieu's eyes. All the murkiness, all the shame through which he had passed in Paris horrified him. He tenderly took his wife in his arms, and they exchanged the closest, the most human of kisses amid the quiet of the slumbering fields. After the scorching pavement of Paris, after the eager struggling of the day and the degrading spectacles of the night, how reposeful was that far-spreading silence, that faint bluish radiance, that endless unrolling of plains, steeped in

refreshing gloom and dreaming of fructification by the morrow's sun! And what suggestions of health, and rectitude, and felicity rose from productive Nature, who fell asleep beneath the dew of night solely that she might reawaken in triumph, ever and ever rejuvenated by life's torrent, which streams even through the dust of her paths.

Mathieu slowly seated Marianne on the low broad parapet once more. He kept her near his heart; it was a halt full of affection, which neither could forego, in presence of the universal peace that came to them from the stars, and the waters, and the woods, and the endless fields.

"What a splendid night!" murmured Mathieu. "How beautiful and how pleasant to live in it!"

Then, after a moment's rapture, during which they both heard their hearts beating, he began to tell her of his day. She questioned him with loving interest, and he answered, happy at having to tell her no lie.

"No, the Beauchenes cannot come here on Sunday. Constance never cared much for us, as you well know. Their boy Maurice is suffering in the legs; Dr. Boutan was there, and the question of children was discussed again. I will tell you all about that. On the other hand, the Moranges have promised to come. You can't have an idea of the delight and vanity they displayed in showing me their new flat. What with their eagerness to make a big fortune I'm much afraid that those worthy folks will do something very foolish. Oh! I was forgetting. I called on the landlord, and though

I had a good deal of difficulty over it, he ended by consenting to have the roof entirely relaid. Ah! what a home, too, those Seguins have! I came away feeling quite scared. But I will tell you all about it by and by with the rest."

Marianne evinced no loquacious curiosity; she quietly awaited his confidences, and showed anxiety only respecting themselves and the children.

"You received your salary, didn't you?" she asked.

"Yes, yes, you need not be afraid about that."

"Oh! I'm not afraid, it's only our little debts which worry me."

Then she asked again: "And did your business dinner go off all right? I was afraid that Beauchene might detain you and make you miss your train."

He replied that everything had gone off properly, but as he spoke he flushed and felt a pang at his heart. To rid himself of his emotion he affected sudden gayety.

"Well, and you, my dear," he asked, "how did you manage with your thirty sous?"

"My thirty sous!" she gayly responded, "why, I was much too rich; we fared like princes, all five of us, and I have six sous left."

Then, in her turn, she gave an account of her day, her daily life, pure as crystal. She recapitulated what she had done, what she had said; she related how the children had behaved, and she entered into the minutest details respecting them and the house. With her, moreover, one day was like another; each morning she set herself to live the same life afresh, with never-failing

happiness.

"To-day, though, we had a visit," said she; "Madame Lepailleur, the woman from the mill over yonder, came to tell me that she had some fine chickens for sale. As we owe her twelve francs for eggs and milk, I believe that she simply called to see if I meant to pay her. I told her that I would go to her place to-morrow."

While speaking Marianne had pointed through the gloom towards a big black pile, a little way down the Yeuse. It was an old water-mill which was still worked, and the Lepailleurs had now been installed in it for three generations. The last of them, Francois Lepailleur, who considered himself to be no fool, had come back from his military service with little inclination to work, and an idea that the mill would never enrich him, any more than it had enriched his father and grandfather. It then occurred to him to marry a peasant farmer's daughter, Victoire Cornu, whose dowry consisted of some neighboring fields skirting the Yeuse. And the young couple then lived fairly at their ease, on the produce of those fields and such small quantities of corn as the peasants of the district still brought to be ground at the old mill. If the antiquated and badly repaired mechanism of the mill had been replaced by modern appliances, and if the land, instead of being impoverished by adherence to old-fashioned practices, had fallen into the hands of an intelligent man who believed in progress, there would no doubt have been a fortune in it all. But Lepailleur was not only disgusted with work, he treated the soil

with contempt. He indeed typified the peasant who has grown weary of his eternal mistress, the mistress whom his forefathers loved too much. Remembering that, in spite of all their efforts to fertilize the soil, it had never made them rich or happy, he had ended by hating it. All his faith in its powers had departed; he accused it of having lost its fertility, of being used up and decrepit, like some old cow which one sends to the slaughter-house. And, according to him, everything went wrong: the soil simply devoured the seed sown in it, the weather was never such as it should be, the seasons no longer came in their proper order. Briefly, it was all a premeditated disaster brought about by some evil power which had a spite against the peasantry, who were foolish to give their sweat and their blood to such a thankless creature.

"Madame Lepailleur brought her boy with her, a little fellow three years old, called Antonin," resumed Marianne, "and we fell to talking of children together. She quite surprised me. Peasant folks, you know, used to have such large families. But she declared that one child was quite enough. Yet she's only twenty-four, and her husband not yet twenty-seven."

These remarks revived the thoughts which had filled Mathieu's mind all day. For a moment he remained silent. Then he said, "She gave you her reasons, no doubt?"

"Give reasons – she, with her head like a horse's, her long freckled face, pale eyes, and tight, miserly mouth – I think she's simply a fool, ever in admiration before her husband because

he fought in Africa and reads the newspapers. All that I could get out of her was that children cost one a good deal more than they bring in. But the husband, no doubt, has ideas of his own. You have seen him, haven't you? A tall, slim fellow, as carroty and as scraggy as his wife, with an angular face, green eyes, and prominent cheekbones. He looks as though he had never felt in a good humor in his life. And I understand that he is always complaining of his father-in-law, because the other had three daughters and a son. Of course that cut down his wife's dowry; she inherited only a part of her father's property. And, besides, as the trade of a miller never enriched his father, Lepailleur curses his mill from morning till night, and declares that he won't prevent his boy Antonin from going to eat white bread in Paris, if he can find a good berth there when he grows up."

Thus, even among the country folks, Mathieu found a small family the rule. Among the causes were the fear of having to split up an inheritance, the desire to rise in the social system, the disgust of manual toil, and the thirst for the luxuries of town life. Since the soil was becoming bankrupt, why indeed continue tilling it, when one knew that one would never grow rich by doing so? Mathieu was on the point of explaining these things to his wife, but he hesitated, and then simply said: "Lepailleur does wrong to complain; he has two cows and a horse, and when there is urgent work he can take an assistant. We, this morning, had just thirty sous belonging to us, and we own no mill, no scrap of land. For my part I think his mill superb; I envy him every time

I cross this bridge. Just fancy! we two being the millers – why, we should be very rich and very happy!"

This made them both laugh, and for another moment they remained seated there, watching the dark massive mill beside the Yeuse. Between the willows and poplars on both banks the little river flowed on peacefully, scarce murmuring as it coursed among the water plants which made it ripple. Then, amid a clump of oaks, appeared the big shed sheltering the wheel, and the other buildings garlanded with ivy, honeysuckle, and creepers, the whole forming a spot of romantic prettiness. And at night, especially when the mill slept, without a light at any of its windows, there was nothing of more dreamy, more gentle charm.

"Why!" remarked Mathieu, lowering his voice, "there is somebody under the willows, beside the water. I heard a slight noise."

"Yes, I know," replied Marianne with tender gayety. "It must be the young couple who settled themselves in the little house yonder a fortnight ago. You know whom I mean – Madame Angelin, that schoolmate of Constance's."

The Angelins, who had become their neighbors, interested the Froments. The wife was of the same age as Marianne, tall, dark, with fine hair and fine eyes, radiant with continual joy, and fond of pleasure. And the husband was of the same age as Mathieu, a handsome fellow, very much in love, with moustaches waving in the wind, and the joyous spirits of a musketeer. They had married with sudden passion for one another, having between them an

income of some ten thousand francs a year, which the husband, a fan painter with a pretty talent, might have doubled had it not been for the spirit of amorous idleness into which his marriage had thrown him. And that spring-time they had sought a refuge in that desert of Janville, that they might love freely, passionately, in the midst of nature. They were always to be met, holding each other by the waist, on the secluded paths in the woods; and at night they loved to stroll across the fields, beside the hedges, along the shady banks of the Yeuse, delighted when they could linger till very late near the murmuring water, in the thick shade of the willows.

But there was quite another side to their idyl, and Marianne mentioned it to her husband. She had chatted with Madame Angelin, and it appeared that the latter wished to enjoy life, at all events for the present, and did not desire to be burdened with children. Then Mathieu's worrying thoughts once more came back to him, and again at this fresh example he wondered who was right – he who stood alone in his belief, or all the others.

"Well," he muttered at last, "we all live according to our fancy. But come, my dear, let us go in; we disturb them."

They slowly climbed the narrow road leading to Chantebled, where the lamp shone out like a beacon. When Mathieu had bolted the front door they groped their way upstairs. The ground floor of their little house comprised a dining-room and a drawing-room on the right hand of the hall, and a kitchen and a store place on the left. Upstairs there were four bedrooms.

Their scanty furniture seemed quite lost in those big rooms; but, exempt from vanity as they were, they merely laughed at this. By way of luxury they had simply hung some little curtains of red stuff at the windows, and the ruddy reflection from these hangings seemed to them to impart wonderfully rich cheerfulness to their home.

They found Zoe, their peasant servant, asleep over her knitting beside the lamp in their own bedroom, and they had to wake her and send her as quietly as possible to bed. Then Mathieu took up the lamp and entered the children's room to kiss them and make sure that they were comfortable. It was seldom they awoke on these occasions. Having placed the lamp on the mantelshelf, he still stood there looking at the three little beds when Marianne joined him. In the bed against the wall at one end of the room lay Blaise and Denis, the twins, sturdy little fellows six years of age; while in the second bed against the opposite wall was Ambroise, now nearly four and quite a little cherub. And the third bed, a cradle, was occupied by Mademoiselle Rose, fifteen months of age and weaned for three weeks past. She lay there half naked, showing her white flowerlike skin, and her mother had to cover her up with the bedclothes, which she had thrust aside with her self-willed little fists. Meantime the father busied himself with Ambroise's pillow, which had slipped aside. Both husband and wife came and went very gently, and bent again and again over the children's faces to make sure that they were sleeping peacefully. They kissed them and lingered yet a little

longer, fancying that they had heard Blaise and Denis stirring. At last the mother took up the lamp and they went off, one after the other, on tiptoe.

When they were in their room again Marianne exclaimed: "I didn't want to worry you while we were out, but Rose made me feel anxious to-day; I did not find her well, and it was only this evening that I felt more at ease about her." Then, seeing that Mathieu started and turned pale, she went on: "Oh! it was nothing. I should not have gone out if I had felt the least fear for her. But with those little folks one is never free from anxiety."

She then began to make her preparations for the night; but Mathieu, instead of imitating her, sat down at the table where the lamp stood, and drew the money paid to him by Morange from his pocket. When he had counted those three hundred francs, those fifteen louis, he said in a bitter, jesting way, "The money hasn't grown on the road. Here it is; you can pay our debts to-morrow."

This remark gave him a fresh idea. Taking his pencil he began to jot down the various amounts they owed on a blank page of his pocket diary. "We say twelve francs to the Lepailleurs for eggs and milk. How much do you owe the butcher?" he asked.

"The butcher," replied Marianne, who had sat down to take off her shoes; "well, say twenty francs."

"And the grocer and the baker?"

"I don't know exactly, but about thirty francs altogether. There is nobody else."

Then Mathieu added up the items: “That makes sixty-two francs,” said he. “Take them away from three hundred, and we shall have two hundred and thirty-eight left. Eight francs a day at the utmost. Well, we have a nice month before us, with our four children to feed, particularly if little Rose should fall ill.”

The remark surprised his wife, who laughed gayly and confidently, saying: “Why, what is the matter with you to-night, my dear? You seem to be almost in despair, when as a rule you look forward to the morrow as full of promise. You have often said that it was sufficient to love life if one wished to live happily. As for me, you know, with you and the little ones I feel the happiest, richest woman in the world!”

At this Mathieu could restrain himself no longer. He shook his head and mournfully began to recapitulate the day he had just spent. At great length he relieved his long-pent-up feelings. He spoke of their poverty and the prosperity of others. He spoke of the Beauchenes, the Moranges, the Seguins, the Lepailleurs, of all he had seen of them, of all they had said, of all their scarcely disguised contempt for an improvident starveling like himself. He, Mathieu, and she, Marianne, would never have factory, nor mansion, nor mill, nor an income of twelve thousand francs a year; and their increasing penury, as the others said, had been their own work. They had certainly shown themselves imprudent, improvident. And he went on with his recollections, telling Marianne that he feared nothing for himself, but that he did not wish to condemn her and the little ones to want

and poverty. She was surprised at first, and by degrees became colder, more constrained, as he told her all that he had upon his mind. Tears slowly welled into her eyes; and at last, however lovingly he spoke, she could no longer restrain herself, but burst into sobs. She did not question what he said, she spoke no words of revolt, but it was evident that her whole being rebelled, and that her heart was sorely grieved.

He started, greatly troubled when he saw her tears. Something akin to her own feelings came upon him. He was terribly distressed, angry with himself. "Do not weep, my darling!" he exclaimed as he pressed her to him: "it was stupid, brutal, and wrong of me to speak to you in that way. Don't distress yourself, I beg you; we'll think it all over and talk about it some other time."

She ceased to weep, but she continued silent, clinging to him, with her head resting on his shoulder. And Mathieu, by the side of that loving, trustful woman, all health and rectitude and purity, felt more and more confused, more and more ashamed of himself, ashamed of having given heed to the base, sordid, calculating principles which others made the basis of their lives. He thought with loathing of the sudden frenzy which had possessed him during the evening in Paris. Some poison must have been instilled into his veins; he could not recognize himself. But honor and rectitude, clear-sightedness and trustfulness in life were fast returning. Through the window, which had remained open, all the sounds of the lovely spring night poured into the room. It was spring, the season of love, and beneath the

palpitating stars in the broad heavens, from fields and forests and waters came the murmur of germinating life. And never had Mathieu more fully realized that, whatever loss may result, whatever difficulty may arise, whatever fate may be in store, all the creative powers of the world, whether of the animal order, whether of the order of the plants, for ever and ever wage life's great incessant battle against death. Man alone, dissolute and diseased among all the other denizens of the world, all the healthful forces of nature, seeks death for death's sake, the annihilation of his species. Then Mathieu again caught his wife in a close embrace, printing on her lips a long, ardent kiss.

"Ah! dear heart, forgive me; I doubted both of us. It would be impossible for either of us to sleep unless you forgive me. Well, let the others hold us in derision and contempt if they choose. Let us love and live as nature tells us, for you are right: therein lies true wisdom and true courage."

V

MATHIEU rose noiselessly from his little folding iron bedstead beside the large one of mahogany, on which Marianne lay alone. He looked at her, and saw that she was awake and smiling.

"What! you are not asleep?" said he. "I hardly dared to stir for fear of waking you. It is nearly nine o'clock, you know."

It was Sunday morning. January had come round, and they were in Paris. During the first fortnight in December the weather had proved frightful at Chantebled, icy rains being followed by snow and terrible cold. This rigorous temperature, coupled with the circumstance that Marianne was again expecting to become a mother, had finally induced Mathieu to accept Beauchene's amiable offer to place at his disposal the little pavilion in the Rue de la Federation, where the founder of the works had lived before building the superb house on the quay. An old foreman who had occupied this pavilion, which still contained the simple furniture of former days, had lately died. And the young folks, desiring to be near their friend, worthy Dr. Boutan, had lived there for a month now, and did not intend to return to Chantebled until the first fine days in April.

"Wait a moment," resumed Mathieu; "I will let the light in."

He thereupon drew back one of the curtains, and a broad ray of yellow, wintry sunshine illumined the dim room. "Ah! there's

the sun! And it's splendid weather – and Sunday too! I shall be able to take you out for a little while with the children this afternoon."

Then Marianne called him to her, and, when he had seated himself on the bed, took hold of his hand and said gayly: "Well, I hadn't been sleeping either for the last twenty minutes; and I didn't move because I wanted you to lie in bed a little late, as it's Sunday. How amusing to think that we were afraid of waking one another when we both had our eyes wide open!"

"Oh!" said he, "I was so happy to think you were sleeping. My one delight on Sundays now is to remain in this room all the morning, and spend the whole day with you and the children." Then he uttered a cry of surprise and remorse: "Why! I haven't kissed you yet."

She had raised herself on her pillows, and he gave her an eager clasp. In the stream of bright sunshine which gilded the bed she herself looked radiant with health and strength and hope. Never had her heavy brown tresses flowed down more abundantly, never had her big eyes smiled with gayer courage. And sturdy and healthful as she was, with her face all kindliness and love, she looked like the very personification of Fruitfulness, the good goddess with dazzling skin and perfect flesh, of sovereign dignity.

They remained for a moment clasped together in the golden sunshine which enveloped them with radiance. Then Mathieu pulled up Marianne's pillows, set the counterpane in order, and

forbade her to stir until he had tidied the room. Forthwith he stripped his little bedstead, folded up the sheets, the mattress, and the bedstead itself, over which he slipped a cover. She vainly begged him not to trouble, saying that Zoe, the servant whom they had brought from the country, could very well do all those things. But he persisted, replying that the servant plagued him, and that he preferred to be alone to attend her and do all that there was to do. Then, as he suddenly began to shiver, he remarked that the room was cold, and blamed himself for not having already lighted the fire. Some logs and some small wood were piled in a corner, near the chimney-piece.

"How stupid of me!" he exclaimed; "here am I leaving you to freeze."

Then he knelt down before the fireplace, while she protested: "What an idea! Leave all that, and call Zoe."

"No, no, she doesn't know how to light the fire properly, and besides, it amuses me."

He laughed triumphantly when a bright clear fire began to crackle, filling the room with additional cheerfulness. The place was now a little paradise, said he; but he had scarcely finished washing and dressing when the partition behind the bed was shaken by a vigorous thumping.

"Ah! the rascals," he gayly exclaimed. "They are awake, you see! Oh! well, we may let them come, since to-day is Sunday."

For a few moments there had been a noise as of an aviary in commotion in the adjoining room. Prattling, shrill chirping, and

ringing bursts of laughter could be heard. Then came a noise as of pillows and bolsters flying about, while two little fists continued pummelling the partition as if it were a drum.

"Yes, yes," said the mother, smiling and anxious, "answer them; tell them to come. They will be breaking everything if you don't."

Thereupon the father himself struck the wall, at which a victorious outburst, cries of triumphal delight, arose on the other side. And Mathieu scarcely had time to open the door before tramping and scuffling could be heard in the passage. A triumphal entry followed. All four of them wore long nightdresses falling to their little bare feet, and they trotted along and laughed, with their brown hair streaming about, their faces quite pink, and their eyes radiant with candid delight. Ambroise, though he was younger than his brothers, marched first, for he was the boldest and most enterprising. Behind him came the twins, Blaise and Denis, who were less turbulent – the latter especially. He taught the others to read, while Blaise, who was rather shy and timid, remained the dreamer of them all. And each gave a hand to little Mademoiselle Rose, who looked like an angel, pulled now to the right and now to the left amid bursts of laughter, while she contrived to keep herself steadily erect.

"Ah! mamma," cried Ambroise, "it's dreadfully cold, you know; do make me a little room."

Forthwith he bounded into the bed, slipped under the coverlet, and nestled close to his mother, so that only his laughing face and

fine curly hair could be seen. But at this the two others raised a shout of war, and rushed forward in their turn upon the besieged citadel.

"Make a little room for us, mamma, make a little room! By your back, mamma! Near your shoulder, mamma!"

Only little Rose remained on the floor, feeling quite vexed and indignant. She had vainly attempted the assault, but had fallen back. "And me, mamma, and me," she pleaded.

It was necessary to help her in her endeavors to hoist herself up with her little hands. Then her mother took her in her arms in order that she might have the best place of all. Mathieu had at first felt somewhat anxious at seeing Marianne thus disturbed, but she laughed and told him not to trouble. And then the picture they all presented as they nestled there was so charming, so full of gayety, that he also smiled.

"It's very nice, it's so warm," said Ambroise, who was fond of taking his ease.

But Denis, the reasonable member of the band, began to explain why it was they had made so much noise "Blaise said that he had seen a spider. And then he felt frightened."

This accusation of cowardice vexed his brother, who replied: "It isn't true. I did see a spider, but I threw my pillow at it to kill it."

"So did I! so did I!" stammered Rose, again laughing wildly. "I threw my pillow like that – houp! houp!"

They all roared and wriggled again, so amusing did it seem

to them. The truth was that they had engaged in a pillow fight under pretence of killing a spider, which Blaise alone said that he had seen. This unsupported testimony left the matter rather doubtful. But the whole brood looked so healthful and fresh in the bright sunshine that their father could not resist taking them in his arms, and kissing them here and there, wherever his lips lighted, a final game which sent them into perfect rapture amid a fresh explosion of laughter and shouts.

"Oh! what fun! what fun!"

"All the same," Marianne exclaimed, as she succeeded in freeing herself somewhat from the embraces of the children, "all the same, you know, I want to get up. I mustn't idle, for it does me no good. And besides, you little ones need to be washed and dressed."

They dressed in front of the big blazing fire; and it was nearly ten o'clock when they at last went down into the dining-room, where the earthenware stove was roaring, while the warm breakfast milk steamed upon the table. The ground floor of the pavilion comprised a dining-room and a drawing-room on the right of the hall, and a kitchen and a study on the left. The dining-room, like the principal bedchamber, overlooked the Rue de la Federation, and was filled every morning with cheerfulness by the rising sun.

The children were already at table, with their noses in their cups, when a ring at the street door was heard. And it was Dr. Boutan who came in. His arrival brought a renewal of noisy

mirth, for the youngsters were fond of his round, good-natured face. He had attended them all at their births, and treated them like an old friend, with whom familiarity is allowable. And so they were already thrusting back their chairs to dart towards the doctor, when a remark from their mother restrained them.

"Now, please just leave the doctor quiet," said she, adding gayly, "Good morning, doctor. I'm much obliged to you for this bright sunshine, for I'm sure you ordered it so that I might go for a walk this afternoon."

"Why, yes, of course I ordered it – I was passing this way, and thought I would look in to see how you were getting on."

Boutan took a chair and seated himself near the table, while Mathieu explained to him that they had remained late in bed.

"Yes, that is all right, let her rest: but she must also take as much exercise as possible. However, there is no cause to worry. I see that she has a good appetite. When I find my patients at table, I cease to be a doctor, you know, I am simply a friend making a call."

Then he put a few questions, which the children, who were busy breakfasting, did not hear. And afterwards there came a pause in the conversation, which the doctor himself resumed, following, no doubt, some train of thought which he did not explain: "I hear that you are to lunch with the Seguins next Thursday," said he. "Ah! poor little woman! That is a terrible affair of hers."

With a gesture he expressed his feelings concerning the

drama that had just upset the Seguins' household. Valentine, like Marianne, was to become a mother. For her part she was in despair at it, and her husband had given way to jealous fury. For a time, amid all their quarrels, they had continued leading their usual life of pleasure, but she now spent her days on a couch, while he neglected her and reverted to a bachelor's life. It was a very painful story, but the doctor was in hopes that Marianne, on the occasion of her visit to the Seguins, might bring some good influence to bear on them.

He rose from his chair and was about to retire, when the attack which had all along threatened him burst forth. The children, unsuspectedly rising from their chairs, had concerted together with a glance, and now they opened their campaign. The worthy doctor all at once found the twins upon his shoulders, while the younger boy clasped him round the waist and the little girl clung to his legs.

"Puff! puff! do the railway train, do the railway train, please do."

They pushed and shook him, amid peal after peal of flute-like laughter, while their father and mother rushed to his assistance, scolding and angry. But he calmed the parents by saying: "Let them be! they are simply wishing me good day. And besides, I must bear with them, you know, since, as our friend Beauchene says, it is a little bit my fault if they are in the world. What charms me with your children is that they enjoy such good health, just like their mother. For the present, at all events, one can ask

nothing more of them."

When he had set them down on the floor, and given each a smacking kiss, he took hold of Marianne's hands and said to her that everything was going on beautifully, and that he was very pleased. Then he went off, escorted to the front door by Mathieu, the pair of them jesting and laughing gayly.

Directly after the midday meal Mathieu wished to go out, in order that Marianne might profit by the bright sunshine. The children had been dressed in readiness before sitting down to table, and it was scarcely more than one o'clock when the family turned the corner of the Rue de la Federation and found itself upon the quays.

This portion of Grenelle, lying between the Champ de Mars and the densely populated streets of the centre of the district, has an aspect all its own, characterized by vast bare expanses, and long and almost deserted streets running at right angles and fringed by factories with lofty, interminable gray walls. During work-hours nobody passes along these streets, and on raising one's head one sees only lofty chimneys belching forth thick coal smoke above the roofs of big buildings with dusty window panes. And if any large cart entrance happens to be open one may espy deep yards crowded with drays and full of acrid vapor. The only sounds are the strident puffs of jets of steam, the dull rumbling of machinery, and the sudden rattle of ironwork lowered from the carts to the pavement. But on Sundays the factories do not work, and the district then falls into death-like silence. In summer

time there is but bright sunshine heating the pavement, in winter some icy snow-laden wind rushing down the lonely streets. The population of Grenelle is said to be the worst of Paris, both the most vicious and the most wretched. The neighborhood of the Ecole Militaire attracts thither a swarm of worthless women, who bring in their train all the scum of the populace. In contrast to all this the gay bourgeois district of Passy rises up across the Seine; while the rich aristocratic quarters of the Invalides and the Faubourg St. Germain spread out close by. Thus the Beauchene works on the quay, as their owner laughingly said, turned their back upon misery and looked towards all the prosperity and gayety of this world.

Mathieu was very partial to the avenues, planted with fine trees, which radiate from the Champ de Mars and the Esplanade des Invalides, supplying great gaps for air and sunlight. But he was particularly fond of that long diversified Quai d'Orsay, which starts from the Rue du Bac in the very centre of the city, passes before the Palais Bourbon, crosses first the Esplanade des Invalides, and then the Champ de Mars, to end at the Boulevard de Grenelle, in the black factory region. How majestically it spread out, what fine old leafy trees there were round that bend of the Seine from the State Tobacco Works to the garden of the Eiffel Tower! The river winds along with sovereign gracefulness; the avenue stretches out under superb foliage. You can really saunter there amid delicious quietude, instinct as it were with all the charm and power of Paris.

It was thither that Mathieu wished to take his wife and the little ones that Sunday. But the distance was considerable, and some anxiety was felt respecting Rose's little legs. She was intrusted to Ambroise, who, although the youngest of the boys, was already energetic and determined. These two opened the march; then came Blaise and Denis, the twins, the parents bringing up the rear. Everything at first went remarkably well: they strolled on slowly in the gay sunshine. That beautiful winter afternoon was exquisitely pure and clear, and though it was very cold in the shade, all seemed golden and velvety in the stretches of bright light. There were a great many people out of doors – all the idle folks, clad in their Sunday best, whom the faintest sunshine draws in crowds to the promenades of Paris. Little Rose, feeling warm and gay, drew herself up as if to show the people that she was a big girl. She crossed the whole extent of the Champ de Mars without asking to be carried. And her three brothers strode along making the frozen pavement resound beneath their steps. Promenaders were ever turning round to watch them. In other cities of Europe the sight of a young married couple preceded by four children would have excited no comment, but here in Paris the spectacle was so unusual that remarks of astonishment, sarcasm, and even compassion were exchanged. Mathieu and Marianne divined, even if they did not actually hear, these comments, but they cared nothing for them. They bravely went their way, smiling at one another, and feeling convinced that the course they had taken in life was the right one, whatever

other folks might think or say.

It was three o'clock when they turned their steps homeward; and Marianne, feeling rather tired, then took a little rest on a sofa in the drawing-room, where Zoe had previously lighted a good fire. The children, quieted by fatigue, were sitting round a little table, listening to a tale which Denis read from a story-book, when a visitor was announced. This proved to be Constance, who, after driving out with Maurice, had thought of calling to inquire after Marianne, whom she saw only once or twice a week, although the little pavilion was merely separated by a garden from the large house on the quay.

"Oh! are you poorly, my dear?" she inquired as she entered the room and perceived Marianne on the sofa.

"Oh! dear, no," replied the other, "but I have been out walking for the last two hours and am now taking some rest."

Mathieu had brought an armchair forward for his wife's rich, vain cousin, who, whatever her real feelings, certainly strove to appear amiable. She apologized for not being able to call more frequently, and explained what a number of duties she had to discharge as mistress of her home. Meantime Maurice, clad in black velvet, hung round her petticoats, gazing from a distance at the other children, who one and all returned his scrutiny.

"Well, Maurice," exclaimed his mother, "don't you wish your little cousins good-day?"

He had to do as he was bidden and step towards them. But all five remained embarrassed. They seldom met, and had as yet had

no opportunity to quarrel. The four little savages of Chantebled felt indeed almost out of their element in the presence of this young Parisian with bourgeois manners.

"And are all your little folks quite well?" resumed Constance, who, with her sharp eyes, was comparing her son with the other lads. "Ambroise has grown; his elder brothers also look very strong."

Her examination did not apparently result to Maurice's advantage. The latter was tall and looked sturdy, but he had quite a waxen complexion. Nevertheless, the glance that Constance gave the others was full of irony, disdain, and condemnation. When she had first heard that Marianne was likely to become a mother once more she had made no secret of her disapproval. She held to her old opinions more vigorously than ever.

Marianne, knowing full well that they would fall out if they discussed the subject of children, sought another topic of conversation. She inquired after Beauchene. "And Alexandre," said she, "why did you not bring him with you? I haven't seen him for a week!"

"Why," broke in Mathieu, "I told you he had gone shooting yesterday evening. He slept, no doubt, at Puymoreau, the other side of Chantebled, so as to be in the woods at daybreak this morning, and he probably won't be home till to-morrow."

"Ah! yes, I remember now. Well, it's nice weather to be in the woods."

This, however, was another perilous subject, and Marianne

regretted having broached it, for, truth to tell, one never knew where Beauchene might really be when he claimed to have gone shooting. He availed himself so often of this pretext to absent himself from home that Constance was doubtless aware of the truth. But in the presence of that household, whose union was so perfect, she was determined to show a brave front.

"Well, you know," said she, "it is I who compel him to go about and take as much exercise as possible. He has a temperament that needs the open air. Shooting is very good for him."

At this same moment there came another ring at the door, announcing another visitor. And this time it was Madame Morange who entered the room, with her daughter Reine. She colored when she caught sight of Madame Beauchene, so keenly was she impressed by that perfect model of wealth and distinction, whom she ever strove to imitate. Constance, however, profited by the diversion of Valerie's arrival to declare that she unfortunately could not remain any longer, as a friend must now be waiting for her at home.

"Well, at all events, leave us Maurice," suggested Mathieu. "Here's Reine here now, and all six children can play a little while together. I will bring you the boy by and by, when he has had a little snack."

But Maurice had already once more sought refuge among his mother's skirts. And she refused the invitation. "Oh! no, no!" said she. "He has to keep to a certain diet, you know, and he must not eat anything away from home. Good-by; I must be off. I called

only to inquire after you all in passing. Keep well; good-by."

Then she led her boy away, never speaking to Valerie, but simply shaking hands with her in a familiar, protecting fashion, which the other considered to be extremely distinguished. Reine, on her side, had smiled at Maurice, whom she already slightly knew. She looked delightful that day in her gown of thick blue cloth, her face smiling under her heavy black tresses, and showing such a likeness to her mother that she seemed to be the latter's younger sister.

Marianne, quite charmed, called the girl to her: "Come and kiss me, my dear! Oh! what a pretty young lady! Why, she is getting quite beautiful and tall. How old is she?"

"Nearly thirteen," Valerie replied.

She had seated herself in the armchair vacated by Constance, and Mathieu noticed what a keen expression of anxiety there was in her soft eyes. After mentioning that she also had called in passing to make inquiries, and declaring that both mother and children looked remarkably well, she relapsed into gloomy silence, scarcely listening to Marianne, who thanked her for having come. Thereupon it occurred to Mathieu to leave her with his wife. To him it seemed that she must have something on her mind, and perhaps she wished to make a confidante of Marianne.

"My dear Reine," said he, "come with these little ones into the dining-room. We will see what afternoon snack there is, and lay the cloth."

This proposal was greeted with shouts of delight, and all the

children trooped into the dining-room with Mathieu. A quarter of an hour later, when everything was ready there, and Valerie came in, the latter's eyes looked very red, as if she had been weeping. And that evening, when Mathieu was alone with his wife, he learnt what the trouble was. Morange's scheme of leaving the Beauchene works and entering the service of the Credit National, where he would speedily rise to a high and lucrative position, his hope too of giving Reine a big dowry and marrying her off to advantage – all the ambitious dreams of rank and wealth in which his wife and he had indulged, now showed no likelihood of fulfilment, since it seemed probable that Valerie might again have a child. Both she and her husband were in despair over it, and though Marianne had done her utmost to pacify her friend and reconcile her to circumstances, there were reasons to fear that in her distracted condition she might do something desperate.

Four days later, when the Froments lunched with the Seguins du Hordel at the luxurious mansion in the Avenue d'Antin, they came upon similar trouble there. Seguin, who was positively enraged, did not scruple to accuse his wife of infidelity, and, on his side, he took to quite a bachelor life. He had been a gambler in his younger days, and had never fully cured himself of that passion, which now broke out afresh, like a fire which has only slumbered for a time. He spent night after night at his club, playing at baccarat, and could be met in the betting ring at every race meeting. Then, too, he glided into equivocal society and

appeared at home only at intervals to vent his irritation and spite and jealousy upon his ailing wife.

She, poor woman, was absolutely guiltless of the charges preferred against her. But knowing her husband, and unwilling for her own part to give up her life of pleasure, she had practised concealment as long as possible. And now she was really very ill, haunted too by an unreasoning, irremovable fear that it would all end in her death. Mathieu, who had seen her but a few months previously looking so fair and fresh, was amazed to find her such a wreck. And on her side Valentine gazed, all astonishment, at Marianne, noticing with surprise how calm and strong the young woman seemed, and how limpid her clear and smiling eyes remained.

On the day of the Froments' visit Seguin had gone out early in the morning, and when they arrived he had not yet returned. Thus the lunch was for a short time kept waiting, and during the interval Celeste, the maid, entered the room where the visitors sat near her mistress, who was stretched upon a sofa, looking a perfect picture of distress. Valentine turned a questioning glance on the servant, who forthwith replied:

"No, madame, Monsieur has not come back yet. But that woman of my village is here. You know, madame, the woman I spoke to you about, Sophie Couteau, La Couteau as we call her at Rougemont, who brings nurses to Paris?"

"Well, what of it?" exclaimed Valentine, on the point of ordering Celeste to leave the room, for it seemed to her quite

outrageous to be disturbed in this manner.

"Well, madame, she's here; and as I told you before, if you would intrust her with the matter now she would find a very good wet nurse for you in the country, and bring her here whenever she's wanted."

La Couteau had been standing behind the door, which had remained ajar, and scarcely had Celeste finished than, without waiting for an invitation, she boldly entered the room. She was a quick little wizened woman, with certain peasant ways, but considerably polished by her frequent journeys to Paris. So far as her small keen eyes and pointed nose went her long face was not unpleasant, but its expression of good nature was marred by her hard mouth, her thin lips, suggestive of artfulness and cupidity. Her gown of dark woollen stuff, her black cape, black mittens, and black cap with yellow ribbons, gave her the appearance of a respectable countrywoman going to mass in her Sunday best.

"Have you been a nurse?" Valentine inquired, as she scrutinized her.

"Yes, madame," replied La Couteau, "but that was ten years ago, when I was only twenty. It seemed to me that I wasn't likely to make much money by remaining a nurse, and so I preferred to set up as an agent to bring others to Paris."

As she spoke she smiled, like an intelligent woman who feels that those who give their services as wet nurses to bourgeois families are simply fools and dupes. However, she feared that she might have said too much on the point, and so she added: "But

one does what one can, eh, madame? The doctor told me that I should never do for a nurse again, and so I thought that I might perhaps help the poor little dears in another manner."

"And you bring wet nurses to the Paris offices?"

"Yes, madame, twice a month. I supply several offices, but more particularly Madame Broquette's office in the Rue Roquepine. It's a very respectable place, where one runs no risk of being deceived – And so, if you like, madame, I will choose the very best I can find for you – the pick of the bunch, so to say. I know the business thoroughly, and you can rely on me."

As her mistress did not immediately reply, Celeste ventured to intervene, and began by explaining how it happened that La Couteau had called that day.

"When she goes back into the country, madame, she almost always takes a baby with her, sometimes a nurse's child, and sometimes the child of people who are not well enough off to keep a nurse in the house. And she takes these children to some of the rearers in the country. She just now came to see me before going round to my friend Madame Menoux, whose baby she is to take away with her."

Valentine became interested. This Madame Menoux was a haberdasher in the neighborhood and a great friend of Celeste's. She had married a former soldier, a tall handsome fellow, who now earned a hundred and fifty francs a month as an attendant at a museum. She was very fond of him, and had bravely set up a little shop, the profits from which doubled their income, in such

wise that they lived very happily and almost at their ease. Celeste, who frequently absented herself from her duties to spend hours gossiping in Madame Menoux's little shop, was forever being scolded for this practice; but in the present instance Valentine, full of anxiety and curiosity, did not chide her. The maid was quite proud at being questioned, and informed her mistress that Madame Menoux's baby was a fine little boy, and that the mother had been attended by a certain Madame Rouche, who lived at the lower end of the Rue du Rocher.

"It was I who recommended her," continued the servant, "for a friend of mine whom she had attended had spoken to me very highly of her. No doubt she has not such a good position as Madame Bourdieu, who has so handsome a place in the Rue de Miromesnil, but she is less expensive, and so very kind and obliging."

Then Celeste suddenly ceased speaking, for she noticed that Mathieu's eyes were fixed upon her, and this, for reasons best known to herself, made her feel uncomfortable. He on his side certainly placed no confidence in this big dark girl with a head like that of a horse, who, it seemed to him, knew far too much.

Marianne joined in the conversation. "But why," asked she, "why does not this Madame Menoux, whom you speak about, keep her baby with her?"

Thereupon La Couteau turned a dark harsh glance upon this lady visitor, who, whatever course she might take herself, had certainly no right to prevent others from doing business.

"Oh! it's impossible," exclaimed Celeste, well pleased with the diversion. "Madame Menoux's shop is no bigger than my pocket-handkerchief, and at the back of it there is only one little room where she and her husband take their meals and sleep. And that room, too, overlooks a tiny courtyard where one can neither see nor breathe. The baby would not live a week in such a place. And, besides, Madame Menoux would not have time to attend to the child. She has never had a servant, and what with waiting on customers and having to cook meals in time for her husband's return from the museum, she never has a moment to spare. Oh! if she could, she would be very happy to keep the little fellow with her."

"It is true," said Marianne sadly; "there are some poor mothers whom I pity with all my heart. This person you speak of is not in poverty, and yet is reduced to this cruel separation. For my part, I should not be able to exist if a child of mine were taken away from me to some unknown spot and given to another woman."

La Couteau doubtless interpreted this as an attack upon herself. Assuming the kindly demeanor of one who dotes on children, the air which she always put on to prevail over hesitating mothers, she replied: "Oh, Rougemont is such a very pretty place. And then it's not far from Bayeux, so that folks are by no means savages there. The air is so pure, too, that people come there to recruit their health. And, besides, the little ones who are confided to us are well cared for, I assure you. One would have to be heartless to do otherwise than love such little angels."

However, like Celeste, she relapsed into silence on seeing how significantly Mathieu was looking at her. Perhaps, in spite of her rustic ways, she understood that there was a false ring in her voice. Besides, of what use was her usual patter about the salubrity of the region, since that lady, Madame Seguin, wished to have a nurse at her house? So she resumed: "Then it's understood, madame, I will bring you the best we have, a real treasure."

Valentine, now a little tranquillized as to her fears for herself, found strength to speak out. "No, no, I won't pledge myself in advance. I will send to see the nurses you bring to the office, and we shall see if there is one to suit me."

Then, without occupying herself further about the woman, she turned to Marianne, and asked: "Shall you nurse your baby yourself?"

"Certainly, as I did with the others. We have very decided opinions on that point, my husband and I."

"No doubt. I understand you: I should much like to do the same myself; but it is impossible."

La Couteau had remained there motionless, vexed at having come on a fruitless errand, and regretting the loss of the present which she would have earned by her obligingness in providing a nurse. She put all her spite into a glance which she shot at Marianne, who, thought she, was evidently some poor creature unable even to afford a nurse. However, at a sign which Celeste made her, she courtesied humbly and withdrew in the company

of the maid.

A few minutes afterwards, Seguin arrived, and, repairing to the dining-room, they all sat down to lunch there. It was a very luxurious meal, comprising eggs, red mullet, game, and crawfish, with red and white Bordeaux wines and iced champagne. Such diet for Valentine and Marianne would never have met with Dr. Boutan's approval; but Seguin declared the doctor to be an unbearable individual whom nobody could ever please.

He, Seguin, while showing all politeness to his guests, seemed that day to be in an execrable temper. Again and again he levelled annoying and even galling remarks at his wife, carrying things to such a point at times that tears came to the unfortunate woman's eyes. Now that he scarcely set foot in the house he complained that everything was going wrong there. If he spent his time elsewhere it was, according to him, entirely his wife's fault. The place was becoming a perfect hell upon earth. And in everything, the slightest incident, the most common-place remark, he found an opportunity for jeers and gibes. These made Mathieu and Marianne extremely uncomfortable; but at last he let fall such a harsh expression that Valentine indignantly rebelled, and he had to apologize. At heart he feared her, especially when the blood of the Vaugelades arose within her, and she gave him to understand, in her haughty disdainful way, that she would some day revenge herself on him for his treatment.

However, seeking another outlet for his spite and rancor, he at last turned to Mathieu, and spoke of Chantebled, saying bitterly

that the game in the covers there was fast becoming scarcer and scarcer, in such wise that he now had difficulty in selling his shooting shares, so that his income from the property was dwindling every year. He made no secret of the fact that he would much like to sell the estate, but where could he possibly find a purchaser for those unproductive woods, those sterile plains, those marshes and those tracts of gravel?

Mathieu listened to all this attentively, for during his long walks in the summer he had begun to take an interest in the estate. "Are you really of opinion that it cannot be cultivated?" he asked. "It's pitiful to see all that land lying waste and idle."

"Cultivate it!" cried Seguin. "Ah! I should like to see such a miracle! The only crops that one will ever raise on it are stones and frogs."

They had by this time eaten their dessert, and before rising from table Marianne was telling Valentine that she would much like to see and kiss her children, who had not been allowed to lunch with their elders on account of their supposed unruly ways, when a couple of visitors arrived in turn, and everything else was forgotten. One was Santerre the novelist, who of late had seldom called on the Seguins, and the other, much to Mathieu's dislike, proved to be Beauchene's sister, Seraphine, the Baroness de Lowicz. She looked at the young man in a bold, provoking, significant manner, and then, like Santerre, cast a sly glance of mocking contempt at Marianne and Valentine. She and the novelist between them soon turned the conversation on

to subjects that appealed to their vicious tastes. And Santerre related that he had lately seen Doctor Gaude perform several operations at the Marbeuf Hospital. He had found there the usual set of society men who attend first performances at the theatres, and indeed there were also some women present.

And then he enlarged upon the subject, giving the crudest and most precise particulars, much to the delight of Seguin, who every now and again interpolated remarks of approval, while both Mathieu and Marianne grew more and more ill at ease. The young woman sat looking with amazement at Santerre as he calmly recapitulated horror after horror, to the evident enjoyment of the others. She remembered having read his last book, that love story which had seemed to her so supremely absurd, with its theories of the annihilation of the human species. And she at last glanced at Mathieu to tell him how weary she felt of all the semi-society and semi-medical chatter around her, and how much she would like to go off home, leaning on his arm, and walking slowly along the sunlit quays. He, for his part, felt a pang at seeing so much insanity rife amid those wealthy surroundings. He made his wife a sign that it was indeed time to take leave.

"What! are you going already!" Valentine then exclaimed. "Well, I dare not detain you if you feel tired." However, when Marianne begged her to kiss the children for her, she added: "Why, yes, it's true you have not seen them. Wait a moment, pray; I want you to kiss them yourself."

But when Celeste appeared in answer to the bell, she

announced that Monsieur Gaston and Mademoiselle Lucie had gone out with their governess. And this made Seguin explode once more. All his rancor against his wife revived. The house was going to rack and ruin. She spent her days lying on a sofa. Since when had the governess taken leave to go out with the children without saying anything? One could not even see the children now in order to kiss them. It was a nice state of things. They were left to the servants; in fact, it was the servants now who controlled the house.

Thereupon Valentine began to cry.

"*Mon Dieu*!" said Marianne to her husband, when she found herself out of doors, able to breathe, and happy once more now that she was leaning on his arm; "why, they are quite mad, the people in that house."

"Yes," Mathieu responded, "they are mad, no doubt; but we must pity them, for they know not what happiness is."

VI

ABOUT nine o'clock one fine cold morning, a few days afterwards, as Mathieu, bound for his office, a little late through having lingered near his wife, was striding hastily across the garden which separated the pavilion from the factory yard, he met Constance and Maurice, who, clad in furs, were going out for a walk in the sharp air. Beauchene, who was accompanying them as far as the gate, bareheaded and ever sturdy and victorious, gayly exclaimed to his wife:

"Give the youngster a good spin on his legs! Let him take in all the fresh air he can. There's nothing like that and good food to make a man."

Mathieu, on hearing this, stopped short. "Has Maurice been poorly again?" he inquired.

"Oh, no!" hastily replied the boy's mother, with an appearance of great gayety, assumed perhaps from an unconscious desire to hide certain covert fears. "Only the doctor wants him to take exercise, and it is so fine this morning that we are going off on quite an expedition."

"Don't go along the quays," said Beauchene again. "Go up towards the Invalides. He'll have much stiffer marching to do when he's a soldier."

Then, the mother and the child having taken themselves off, he went back into the works with Mathieu, adding in his

triumphant way: “That youngster, you know, is as strong as an oak. But women are always so nervous. For my part, I’m quite easy in mind about him, as you can see.” And with a laugh he concluded: “When one has but one son, he keeps him.”

That same day, about an hour later, a terrible dispute which broke out between old Moineaud’s daughters, Norine and Euphrasie, threw the factory into a state of commotion. Norine’s intrigue with Beauchene had ended in the usual way. He had soon tired of the girl and betaken himself to some other passing fancy, leaving her to her tears, her shame, and all the consequences of her fault; for although it had hitherto been possible for her to conceal her condition from her parents, she was unable to deceive her sister, who was her constant companion. The two girls were always bickering, and Norine had for some time lived in dread of scandal and exposure. And that day the trouble came to a climax, beginning with a trivial dispute about a bit of glass-paper in the workroom, then developing into a furious exchange of coarse, insulting language, and culminating in a frantic outburst from Euphrasie, who shrieked to the assembled work-girls all that she knew about her sister.

There was an outrageous scene: the sisters fought, clawing and scratching one another desperately, and could not be separated until Beauchene, Mathieu, and Morange, attracted by the extraordinary uproar, rushed into the workroom and restored a little order. Fortunately for Beauchene, Euphrasie did not know the whole truth, and Norine, after giving her employer a humble,

supplicating glance, kept silence; but old Moineaud was present, and the public revelation of his daughter's shame sent him into a fury. He ordered Norine out of the works forthwith, and threatened to throw her out of window should he find her at home when he returned there in the evening. And Beauchene, both annoyed at the scandal and ashamed at being the primary cause of it, did not venture to interfere. It was only after the unhappy Norine had rushed off sobbing that he found strength of mind to attempt to pacify the father, and assert his authority in the workroom by threatening to dismiss one and all of the girls if the slightest scandal, the slightest noise, should ever occur there again.

Mathieu was deeply pained by the scene, but kept his own counsel. What most astonished him was the promptness with which Beauchene regained his self-possession as soon as Norine had fled, and the majesty with which he withdrew to his office after threatening the others and restoring order. Another whom the scene had painfully affected was Morange, whom Mathieu, to his surprise, found ghastly pale, with trembling hands, as if indeed he had had some share of responsibility in this unhappy business. But Morange, as he confided to Mathieu, was distressed for other reasons. The scene in the workroom, the revelation of Norine's condition, the fate awaiting the girl driven away into the bleak, icy streets, had revived all his own poignant worries with respect to Valerie. Mathieu had already heard of the latter's trouble from his wife, and he speedily

grasped the accountant's meaning. It vaguely seemed to him also that Morange was yielding to the same unreasoning despair as Valerie, and was almost willing that she should take the desperate course which she had hinted to Marianne. But it was a very serious matter, and Mathieu did not wish to be in any way mixed up in it. Having tried his best to pacify the cashier, he sought forgetfulness of these painful incidents in his work.

That afternoon, however, a little girl, Cecile Moineaud, the old fitter's youngest daughter, slipped into his office, with a message from her mother, beseeching him to speak with her. He readily understood that the woman wished to see him respecting Norine, and in his usual compassionate way he consented to go. The interview took place in one of the adjacent streets, down which the cold winter wind was blowing. La Moineaude was there with Norine and another little girl of hers, Irma, a child eight years of age. Both Norine and her mother wept abundantly while begging Mathieu to help them. He alone knew the whole truth, and was in a position to approach Beauchene on the subject. La Moineaude was firmly determined to say nothing to her husband. She trembled for his future and that of her son Alfred, who was now employed at the works; for there was no telling what might happen if Beauchene's name should be mentioned. Life was indeed hard enough already, and what would become of them all should the family bread-winners be turned away from the factory? Norine certainly had no legal claim on Beauchene, the law being peremptory on that point; but, now that she had lost

her employment, and was driven from home by her father, could he leave her to die of want in the streets? The girl tried to enforce her moral claim by asserting that she had always been virtuous before meeting Beauchene. In any case, her lot remained a very hard one. That Beauchene was the father of her child there could be no doubt; and at last Mathieu, without promising success, told the mother that he would do all he could in the matter.

He kept his word that same afternoon, and after a great deal of difficulty he succeeded. At first Beauchene fumed, stormed, denied, equivocated, almost blamed Mathieu for interfering, talked too of blackmail, and put on all sorts of high and mighty airs. But at heart the matter greatly worried him. What if Norine or her mother should go to his wife? Constance might close her eyes as long as she simply suspected things, but if complaints were formally, openly made to her, there would be a terrible scandal. On the other hand, however, should he do anything for the girl, it would become known, and everybody would regard him as responsible. And then there would be no end to what he called the blackmailing.

However, when Beauchene reached this stage Mathieu felt that the battle was gained. He smiled and answered: "Of course, one can never tell – the girl is certainly not malicious. But when women are driven beyond endurance, they become capable of the worst follies. I must say that she made no demands of me; she did not even explain what she wanted; she simply said that she could not remain in the streets in this bleak weather, since her

father had turned her away from home. If you want my opinion, it is this: I think that one might at once put her to board at a proper place. Let us say that four or five months will elapse before she is able to work again; that would mean a round sum of five hundred francs in expenses. At that cost she might be properly looked after."

Beauchene walked nervously up and down, and then replied: "Well, I haven't a bad heart, as you know. Five hundred francs more or less will not inconvenience me. If I flew into a temper just now it was because the mere idea of being robbed and imposed upon puts me beside myself. But if it's a question of charity, why, then, do as you suggest. It must be understood, however, that I won't mix myself up in anything; I wish even to remain ignorant of what you do. Choose a nurse, place the girl where you please, and I will simply pay the bill. Neither more nor less."

Then he heaved a sigh of relief at the prospect of being extricated from this equivocal position, the worry of which he refused to acknowledge. And once more he put on the mien of a superior, victorious man, one who is certain that he will win all the battles of life. In fact, he even jested about the girl, and at last went off repeating his instructions: "See that my conditions are fully understood. I don't want to know anything about any child. Do whatever you please, but never let me hear another word of the matter."

That day was certainly one fertile in incidents, for in the

evening there was quite an alarm at the Beauchenes. At the moment when they were about to sit down to dinner little Maurice fainted away and fell upon the floor. Nearly a quarter of an hour elapsed before the child could be revived, and meantime the distracted parents quarrelled and shouted, accusing one another of having compelled the lad to go out walking that morning in such cold, frosty weather. It was evidently that foolish outing which had chilled him. At least, this was what they said to one another by way of quieting their anxiety. Constance, while she held her boy in her arms, pictured him as dead. It occurred to her for the first time that she might possibly lose him. At this idea she experienced a terrible heart-pang, and a feeling of motherliness came upon her, so acute that it was like a revelation. The ambitious woman that was in her, she who dreamt of royalty for that only son, the future princely owner of the ever-growing family fortune, likewise suffered horribly. If she was to lose that son she would have no child left. Why had she none other? Was it not she who had willed it thus? At this thought a feeling of desperate regret shot through her like a red-hot blade, burning her cruelly to the very depths of her being. Maurice, however, at last recovered consciousness, and even sat down to the table and ate with a fair appetite. Then Beauchene immediately shrugged his shoulders, and began to jest about the unreasoning fears of women. And as time went by Constance herself ceased to think of the incident.

On the morrow, when Mathieu had to attend to the delicate

mission which he had undertaken, he remembered the two women of whom Celeste, the maid, had spoken on the day of his visit to the Seguins. He at first dismissed all idea of that Madame Rouche, of whom the girl had spoken so strangely, but he thought of making some inquiries respecting Madame Bourdieu, who accommodated boarders at the little house where she resided in the Rue de Miromesnil. And he seemed to remember that this woman had attended Madame Morange at the time of Reine's birth, a circumstance which induced him to question the cashier.

At the very first words the latter seemed greatly disturbed. "Yes, a lady friend recommended Madame Bourdieu to my wife," said he; "but why do you ask me?"

And as he spoke he looked at Mathieu with an expression of anguish, as if that sudden mention of Madame Bourdieu's name signified that the young fellow had guessed his secret preoccupations. It was as though he had been abruptly surprised in wrong-doing. Perhaps, too, certain dim, haunting thoughts, which he had long been painfully revolving in his mind, without as yet being able to come to a decision, took shape at that moment. At all events, he turned pale and his lips trembled.

Then, as Mathieu gave him to understand that it was a question of placing Norine somewhere, he involuntarily let an avowal escape him.

"My wife was speaking to me of Madame Bourdieu only this morning," he began. "Oh! I don't know how it happened, but, as you are aware, Reine was born so many years ago that I can't

give you any precise information. It seems that the woman has done well, and is now at the head of a first-class establishment. Inquire there yourself; I have no doubt you will find what you want there."

Mathieu followed this advice; but at the same time, as he had been warned that Madame Bourdieu's terms were rather high, he stifled his prejudices and began by repairing to the Rue du Rocher in order to reconnoitre Madame Rouche's establishment and make some inquiries of her. The mere aspect of the place chilled him. It was one of the black houses of old Paris, with a dark, evil-smelling passage, leading into a small yard which the nurse's few squalid rooms overlooked. Above the passage entrance was a yellow signboard which simply bore the name of Madame Rouche in big letters. She herself proved to be a person of five- or six-and-thirty, gowned in black and spare of figure, with a leaden complexion, scanty hair of no precise color, and a big nose of unusual prominence. With her low, drawling speech, her prudent, cat-like gestures, and her sour smile, he divined her to be a dangerous, unscrupulous woman. She told him that, as the accommodation at her disposal was so small, she only took boarders for a limited time, and this of course enabled him to curtail his inquiries. Glad to have done with her, he hurried off, oppressed by nausea and vaguely frightened by what he had seen of the place.

On the other hand, Madame Bourdieu's establishment, a little three-storied house in the Rue de Miromesnil, between the

Rue La Boetie and the Rue de Penthievre, offered an engaging aspect, with its bright facade and muslin-curtained windows. And Madame Bourdieu, then two-and-thirty, rather short and stout, had a broad, pleasant white face, which had greatly helped her on the road to success. She expatiated to Mathieu on the preliminary training that was required by one of her profession, the cost of it, the efforts needed to make a position, the responsibilities, the inspections, the worries of all sorts that she had to face; and she plainly told the young man that her charge for a boarder would be two hundred francs a month. This was far more than he was empowered to give; however, after some further conversation, when Madame Bourdieu learnt that it was a question of four months' board, she became more accommodating, and agreed to accept a round sum of six hundred francs for the entire period, provided that the person for whom Mathieu was acting would consent to occupy a three-bedded room with two other boarders.

Altogether there were about a dozen boarders' rooms in the house, some of these having three, and even four, beds; while others, the terms for which were naturally higher, contained but one. Madame Bourdieu could accommodate as many as thirty boarders, and as a rule, she had some five-and-twenty staying on her premises. Provided they complied with the regulations, no questions were asked them. They were not required to say who they were or whence they came, and in most cases they were merely known by some Christian name which they chose to give.

Mathieu ended by agreeing to Madame Bourdieu's terms, and

that same evening Norine was taken to her establishment. Some little trouble ensued with Beauchene, who protested when he learnt that five hundred francs would not suffice to defray the expenses. However, Mathieu managed affairs so diplomatically that at last the other not only became reconciled to the terms, but provided the money to purchase a little linen, and even agreed to supply pocket-money to the extent of ten francs a month. Thus, five days after Norine had entered Madame Bourdieu's establishment, Mathieu decided to return thither to hand the girl her first ten francs and tell her that he had settled everything.

He found her there in the boarders' refectory with some of her companions in the house – a tall, thin, severe-looking Englishwoman, with lifeless eyes and bloodless lips, who called herself Amy, and a pale red-haired girl with a tip-tilted nose and a big mouth, who was known as Victoire. Then, too, there was a young person of great beauty answering to the name of Rosine, a jeweller's daughter, so Norine told Mathieu, whose story was at once pathetic and horrible. The young man, while waiting to see Madame Bourdieu, who was engaged, sat for a time answering Norine's questions, and listening to the others, who conversed before him in a free and open way. His heart was wrung by much that he heard, and as soon as he could rid himself of Norine he returned to the waiting-room, eager to complete his business. There, however, two women who wished to consult Madame Bourdieu, and who sat chatting side by side on a sofa, told him that she was still engaged, so that he was compelled to

tarry a little longer. He ensconced himself in a large armchair, and taking a newspaper from his pocket, began to read it. But he had not been thus occupied for many minutes before the door opened and a servant entered, ushering in a lady dressed in black and thickly veiled, whom she asked to be good enough to wait her turn. Mathieu was on the point of rising, for, though his back was turned to the door, he could see, in a looking-glass, that the new arrival was none other than Morange's wife, Valerie. After a moment's hesitation, however, the sight of her black gown and thick veil, which seemed to indicate that she desired to escape recognition, induced him to dive back into his armchair and feign extreme attention to his newspaper. She, on her side, had certainly not noticed him, but by glancing slantwise towards the looking-glass he could observe all her movements.

Meantime the conversation between the other women on the sofa continued, and to Mathieu's surprise it suddenly turned on Madame Rouche, concerning whom one of them began telling the most horrible stories, which fully confirmed the young man's previous suspicions. These stories seemed to have a powerful fascination for Valerie, who sat in a corner, never stirring, but listening intently. She did not even turn her head towards the other women, but, beneath her veil, Mathieu could detect her big eyes glittering feverishly. She started but once. It was when one of the others inquired of her friend where that horrid creature La Rouche resided, and the other replied, "At the lower end of the Rue du Rocher."

Then their chatter abruptly ceased, for Madame Bourdieu made her appearance on the threshold of her private room. The gossips exchanged only a few words with her, and then, as Mathieu remained in his armchair, the high back of which concealed him from view, Valerie rose from her seat and followed Madame Bourdieu into the private room.

As soon as he was alone the young man let his newspaper fall upon his knees, and lapsed into a reverie, haunted by all the chatter he had heard, both there and in Norine's company, and shuddering at the thought of the dreadful secrets that had been revealed to him. How long an interval elapsed he could not tell, but at last he was suddenly roused by a sound of voices.

Madame Bourdieu was now escorting Valerie to the door. She had the same plump fresh face as usual, and even smiled in a motherly way; but the other was quivering, as with distress and grief. "You are not sensible, my dear child," said Madame Bourdieu to her. "It is simply foolish of you. Come, go home and be good."

Then, Valerie having withdrawn without uttering a word, Madame Bourdieu was greatly surprised to see Mathieu, who had risen from his chair. And she suddenly became serious, displeased with herself at having spoken in his presence. Fortunately, a diversion was created by the arrival of Norine, who came in from the refectory; and Mathieu then promptly settled his business and went off, after promising Norine that he would return some day to see her.

To make up for lost time he was walking hastily towards the Rue La Boetie, when, all at once, he came to a halt, for at the very corner of that street he again perceived Valerie, now talking to a man, none other than her husband. So Morange had come with her, and had waited for her in the street while she interviewed Madame Bourdieu. And now they both stood there consulting together, hesitating and evidently in distress. It was plain to Mathieu that a terrible combat was going on within them. They stamped about, moved hither and thither in a feverish way, then halted once more to resume their conversation in a whisper. At one moment the young man felt intensely relieved, for, turning into the Rue La Boetie, they walked on slowly, as if downcast and resigned, in the direction of Grenelle. But all at once they halted once more and exchanged a few words; and then Mathieu's heart contracted as he saw them retrace their steps along the Rue La Boetie and follow the Rue de la Pepiniere as far as the Rue du Rocher. He readily divined whither they were going, but some irresistible force impelled him to follow them; and before long, from an open doorway, in which he prudently concealed himself, he saw them look round to ascertain whether they were observed, and then slink, first the wife and afterwards the husband, into the dark passage of La Rouche's house. For a moment Mathieu lingered in his hiding-place, quivering, full of dread and horror; and when at last he turned his steps homeward it was with a heavy heart indeed.

The weeks went by, the winter ran its course, and March had

come round, when the memory of all that the young fellow had heard and seen that day – things which he had vainly striven to forget – was revived in the most startling fashion. One morning at eight o'clock Morange abruptly called at the little pavilion in the Rue de la Federation, accompanied by his daughter Reine. The cashier was livid, haggard, distracted, and as soon as Reine had joined Mathieu's children, and could not hear what he said, he implored the young man to come with him. In a gasp he told the dreadful truth – Valerie was dying. Her daughter believed her to be in the country, but that was a mere fib devised to quiet the girl. Valerie was elsewhere, in Paris, and he, Morange, had a cab waiting below, but lacked the strength to go back to her alone, so poignant was his grief, so great his dread.

Mathieu was expecting a happy event that very day, and he at first told the cashier that he could not possibly go with him; but when he had informed Marianne that he believed that something dreadful had happened to the Moranges, she bravely bade him render all assistance. And then the two men drove, as Mathieu had anticipated, to the Rue du Rocher, and there found the hapless Valerie, not dying, but dead, and white, and icy cold. Ah! the desperate, tearless grief of the husband, who fell upon his knees at the bedside, benumbed, annihilated, as if he also felt death's heavy hand upon him.

For a moment, indeed, the young man anticipated exposure and scandal. But when he hinted this to La Rouche she faintly smiled. She had friends on many sides, it seemed. She had

already reported Valerie's death at the municipal office, and the doctor, who would be sent to certify the demise, would simply ascribe it to natural causes. Such was the usual practice!

Then Mathieu bethought himself of leading Morange away; but the other, still plunged in painful stupor, did not heed him.

"No, no, my friend, I pray you, say nothing," he at last replied, in a very faint, distant voice, as though he feared to awaken the unfortunate woman who had fallen asleep forever. "I know what I have done; I shall never forgive myself. If she lies there, it is because I consented. Yet I adored her, and never wished her aught but happiness. I loved her too much, and I was weak. Still, I was the husband, and when her madness came upon her I ought to have acted sensibly, and have warned and dissuaded her. I can understand and excuse her, poor creature; but as for me, it is all over; I am a wretch; I feel horrified with myself."

All his mediocrity and tenderness of heart sobbed forth in this confession of his weakness. And his voice never gave sign of animation, never rose in a louder tone from the depths of his annihilated being, which would evermore be void. "She wished to be gay, and rich, and happy," he continued. "It was so legitimate a wish on her part, she was so intelligent and beautiful! There was only one delight for me, to content her tastes and satisfy her ambition. You know our new flat. We spent far too much money on it. Then came that story of the Credit National and the hope of speedily rising to fortune. And thus, when the trouble came, and I saw her distracted at the idea of having to renounce all

her dreams, I became as mad as she was, and suffered her to do her will. We thought that our only means of escaping from everlasting penury and drudgery was to evade Nature, and now, alas! she lies there."

Morange's lugubrious voice, never broken by a sob, never rising to violence, but sounding like a distant, monotonous, mournful knell, rent Mathieu's heart. He sought words of consolation, and spoke of Reine.

"Ah, yes!" said the other, "I am very fond of Reine. She is so like her mother. You will keep her at your house till to-morrow, won't you? Tell her nothing; let her play; I will acquaint her with this dreadful misfortune. And don't worry me, I beg you, don't take me away. I promise you that I will keep very quiet: I will simply stay here, watching her. Nobody will even hear me; I shan't disturb any one."

Then his voice faltered and he stammered a few more incoherent phrases as he sank into a dream of his wrecked life.

Mathieu, seeing him so quiet, so overcome, at last decided to leave him there, and, entering the waiting cab, drove back to Grenelle. Ah! it was indeed relief for him to see the crowded, sunlit streets again, and to breathe the keen air which came in at both windows of the vehicle. Emerging from that horrid gloom, he breathed gladly beneath the vast sky, all radiant with healthy joy. And the image of Marianne arose before him like a consolatory promise of life's coming victory, an atonement for every shame and iniquity. His dear wife, whom everlasting hope

kept full of health and courage, and through whom, even amid her pangs, love would triumph, while they both held themselves in readiness for to-morrow's allotted effort! The cab rolled on so slowly that Mathieu almost despaired, eager as he was to reach his bright little house, that he might once more take part in life's poem, that august festival instinct with so much suffering and so much joy, humanity's everlasting hymn, the coming of a new being into the world.

That very day, soon after his return, Denis and Blaise, Ambroise, Rose, and Reine were sent round to the Beauchenes', where they filled the house with their romping mirth. Maurice, however, was again ailing, and had to lie upon a sofa, disconsolate at being unable to take part in the play of the others. "He has pains in his legs," said his father to Mathieu, when he came round to inquire after Marianne; "he's growing so fast, and getting such a big fellow, you know."

Lightly as Beauchene spoke, his eyes even then wavered, and his face remained for a moment clouded. Perhaps, in his turn, he also had felt the passing of that icy breath from the unknown which one evening had made Constance shudder with dread whilst she clasped her swooning boy in her arms.

But at that moment Mathieu, who had left Marianne's room to answer Beauchene's inquiries, was summoned back again. And there he now found the sunlight streaming brilliantly, like a glorious greeting to new life. While he yet stood there, dazzled by the glow, the doctor said to him: "It is a boy."

Then Mathieu leant over his wife and kissed her lovingly. Her beautiful eyes were still moist with the tears of anguish, but she was already smiling with happiness.

"Dear, dear wife," said Mathieu, "how good and brave you are, and how I love you!"

"Yes, yes, I am very happy," she faltered, "and I must try to give you back all the love that you give me."

Ah! that room of battle and victory, it seemed radiant with triumphant glory. Elsewhere was death, darkness, shame, and crime, but here holy suffering had led to joy and pride, hope and trustfulness in the coming future. One single being born, a poor bare wee creature, raising the faint cry of a chilly fledgeling, and life's immense treasure was increased and eternity insured. Mathieu remembered one warm balmy spring night when, yonder at Chantebled, all the perfumes of fruitful nature had streamed into their room in the little hunting-box, and now around him amid equal rapture he beheld the ardent sunlight flaring, chanting the poem of eternal life that sprang from love the eternal.

VII

"I TELL you that I don't need Zoe to give the child a bath," exclaimed Mathieu half in anger. "Stay in bed, and rest yourself!"

"But the servant must get the bath ready," replied Marianne, "and bring you some warm water."

She laughed as if amused by the dispute, and he ended by laughing also.

Two days previously they had re-installed themselves in the little pavilion on the verge of the woods near Janville which they rented from the Seguins. So impatient, indeed, were they to find themselves once more among the fields that in spite of the doctor's advice Marianne had made the journey but fifteen days after giving birth to her little boy. However, a precocious springtide brought with it that March such balmy warmth and sunshine that the only ill-effect she experienced was a little fatigue. And so, on the day after their arrival – Sunday – Mathieu, glad at being able to remain with her, insisted that she should rest in bed, and only rise about noon, in time for dejeuner.

"Why," he repeated, "I can very well attend to the child while you rest. You have him in your arms from morning till night. And, besides, if you only knew how pleased I am to be here again with you and the dear little fellow."

He approached her to kiss her gently, and with a fresh laugh she returned his kiss. It was quite true: they were both delighted

to be back at Chantebled, which recalled to them such loving memories. That room, looking towards the far expanse of sky and all the countryside, renascent, quivering with sap, was gilded with gayety by the early springtide.

Marianne leant over the cradle which was near her, beside the bed. "The fact is," said she, "Master Gervais is sound asleep. Just look at him. You will never have the heart to wake him."

Then both father and mother remained for a moment gazing at their sleeping child. Marianne had passed her arm round her husband's neck and was clinging to him, as they laughed delightedly over the cradle in which the little one slumbered. He was a fine child, pink and white already; but only a father and mother could thus contemplate their offspring. As the baby opened his eyes, which were still full of all the mystery whence he had come, they raised exclamations full of emotion.

"You know, he saw me!"

"Certainly, and me too. He looked at me: he turned his head."

"Oh, the cherub!"

It was but an illusion, but that dear little face, still so soft and silent, told them so many things which none other would have heard! They found themselves repeated in the child, mingled as it were together; and detected extraordinary likenesses, which for hours and for days kept them discussing the question as to which of them he most resembled. Moreover, each proved very obstinate, declaring that he was the living portrait of the other.

As a matter of course, Master Gervais had no sooner opened

his eyes than he began to shriek. But Marianne was pitiless: her rule was the bath first and milk afterwards. Zoe brought up a big jug of hot water, and then set out the little bath near the window in the sunlight. And Mathieu, all obstinacy, bathed the child, washing him with a soft sponge for some three minutes, while Marianne, from her bed, watched over the operation, jesting about the delicacy of touch that he displayed, as if the child were some fragile new-born divinity whom he feared to bruise with his big hands. At the same time they continued marvelling at the delightful scene. How pretty he looked in the water, his pink skin shining in the sunlight! And how well-behaved he was, for it was wonderful to see how quickly he ceased wailing and gave signs of satisfaction when he felt the all-enveloping caress of the warm water. Never had father and mother possessed such a little treasure.

"And now," said Mathieu, when Zoe had helped him to wipe the boy with a fine cloth, "and now we will weigh Master Gervais."

This was a complicated operation, which was rendered the more difficult by the extreme repugnance that the child displayed. He struggled and wriggled on the platform of the weighing scales to such a degree that it was impossible to arrive at his correct weight, in order to ascertain how much this had increased since the previous occasion. As a rule, the increase varied from six to seven ounces a week. The father generally lost patience over the operation, and the mother had to intervene.

"Here! put the scales on the table near my bed, and give me the little one in his napkin. We will see what the napkin weighs afterwards."

At this moment, however, the customary morning invasion took place. The other four children, who were beginning to know how to dress themselves, the elder ones helping the younger, and Zoe lending a hand at times, darted in at a gallop, like frolicsome escaped colts. Having thrown themselves on papa's neck and rushed upon mamma's bed to say good-morning, the boys stopped short, full of admiration and interest at the sight of Gervais in the scales. Rose, however, still rather uncertain on her legs, caught hold of the scales in her impatient efforts to climb upon the bed, and almost toppled everything over. "I want to see! I want to see!" she cried in her shrill voice.

At this the others likewise wished to meddle, and already stretched out their little hands, so that it became necessary to turn them out of doors.

"Now kindly oblige me by going to play outside," said Mathieu. "Take your hats and remain under the window, so that we may hear you."

Then, in spite of the complaints and leaps of Master Gervais, Marianne was at last able to obtain his correct weight. And what delight there was, for he had gained more than seven ounces during the week. After losing weight during the first three days, like all new-born children, he was now growing and filling out like a strong, healthy human plant. They could already picture

him walking, sturdy and handsome. His mother, sitting up in bed, wrapped his swaddling clothes around him with her deft, nimble hands, jesting the while and answering each of his plaintive wails.

"Yes, yes, I know, we are very, very hungry. But it is all right; the soup is on the fire, and will be served to Monsieur smoking hot."

On awakening that morning she had made a real Sunday toilette: her superb hair was caught up in a huge chignon which disclosed the whiteness of her neck, and she wore a white flannel lace-trimmed dressing-jacket, which allowed but a little of her bare arms to be seen. Propped up by two pillows, she laughingly offered her breast to the child, who was already protruding his lips and groping with his hands. And when he found what he wanted he eagerly began to suck.

Mathieu, seeing that both mother and babe were steeped in sunshine, then went to draw one of the curtains, but Marianne exclaimed: "No, no, leave us the sun; it doesn't inconvenience us at all, it fills our veins with springtide."

He came back and lingered near the bed. The sun's rays poured over it, and life blazed there in a florescence of health and beauty. There is no more glorious blossoming, no more sacred symbol of living eternity than an infant at its mother's breast. It is like a prolongation of maternity's travail, when the mother continues giving herself to her babe, offering him the fountain of life that shall make him a man.

Scarce is he born to the world than she takes him back and

clasps him to her bosom, that he may there again have warmth and nourishment. And nothing could be more simple or more necessary. Marianne, both for her own sake and that of her boy, in order that beauty and health might remain their portion, was naturally his nurse.

Little Gervais was still sucking when Zoe, after tidying the room, came up again with a big bunch of lilac, and announced that Monsieur and Madame Angelin had called, on their way back from an early walk, to inquire after Madame.

"Show them up," said Marianne gayly; "I can well receive them."

The Angelins were the young couple who, having installed themselves in a little house at Janville, ever roamed the lonely paths, absorbed in their mutual passion. She was delicious – dark, tall, admirably formed, always joyous and fond of pleasure. He, a handsome fellow, fair and square shouldered, had the gallant mien of a musketeer with his streaming moustache. In addition to their ten thousand francs a year, which enabled them to live as they liked, he earned a little money by painting pretty fans, flowery with roses and little women deftly postured. And so their life had hitherto been a game of love, an everlasting billing and cooing. Towards the close of the previous summer they had become quite intimate with the Froments, through meeting them well-nigh every day.

"Can we come in? Are we not intruding?" called Angelin, in his sonorous voice, from the landing.

Then Claire, his wife, as soon as she had kissed Marianne, apologized for having called so early.

"We only learnt last night, my dear," said she, "that you had arrived the day before. We didn't expect you for another eight or ten days. And so, as we passed the house just now, we couldn't resist calling. You will forgive us, won't you?" Then, never waiting for an answer, she added with the petulant vivacity of a tom-tit whom the open air had intoxicated: "Oh! so there is the new little gentleman – a boy, am I not right? And your health is good? But really I need not ask it. *Mon Dieu*, what a pretty little fellow he is! Look at him, Robert; how pretty he is! A real little doll! Isn't he funny now, isn't he funny! He is quite amusing."

Her husband, observing her gayety, drew near and began to admire the child by way of following her example. "Ah yes, he is really a pretty baby. But I have seen so many frightful ones – thin, puny, bluish little things, looking like little plucked chickens. When they are white and plump they are quite nice."

Mathieu began to laugh, and twitted the Angelins on having no child of their own. But on this point they held very decided opinions. They wished to enjoy life, unburdened by offspring, while they were young. As for what might happen in five or six years' time, that, of course, was another matter. Nevertheless, Madame Angelin could not help being struck by the delightful picture which Marianne, so fresh and gay, presented with her plump little babe at her breast in that white bed amid the bright sunshine.

At last she remarked: “There’s one thing. I certainly could not feed a child. I should have to engage a nurse for any baby of mine.”

“Of course!” her husband replied. “I would never allow you to feed it. It would be idiotic.”

These words had scarcely passed his lips when he regretted them and apologized to Marianne, explaining that no mother possessed of means was nowadays willing to face the trouble and worry of nursing.

“Oh! for my part,” Marianne responded, with her quiet smile, “if I had a hundred thousand francs a year I should nurse all my children, even were there a dozen of them. To begin with, it is so healthful, you know, both for mother and child: and if I didn’t do my duty to the little one I should look on myself as a criminal, as a mother who grudged her offspring health and life.”

Lowering her beautiful soft eyes towards her boy, she watched him with a look of infinite love, while he continued nursing gluttonously. And in a dreamy voice she continued: “To give a child of mine to another – oh no, never! I should feel too jealous. I want my children to be entirely my own. And it isn’t merely a question of a child’s physical health. I speak of his whole being, of the intelligence and heart that will come to him, and which he ought to derive from me alone. If I should find him foolish or malicious later on, I should think that his nurse had poisoned him. Dear little fellow! when he pulls like that it is as if he were drinking me up entirely.”

Then Mathieu, deeply moved, turned towards the others, saying: "Ah! she is quite right. I only wish that every mother could hear her, and make it the fashion in France once more to suckle their infants. It would be sufficient if it became an ideal of beauty. And, indeed, is it not of the loftiest and brightest beauty?"

The Angelins complaisantly began to laugh, but they did not seem convinced. Just as they rose to take their leave an extraordinary uproar burst forth beneath the window, the piercing clamor of little wildings, freely romping in the fields. And it was all caused by Ambroise throwing a ball, which had lodged itself on a tree. Blaise and Denis were flinging stones at it to bring it down, and Rose called and jumped and stretched out her arms as if she hoped to be able to reach the ball. The Angelins stopped short, surprised and almost nervous.

"Good heavens!" murmured Claire, "what will it be when you have a dozen?"

"But the house would seem quite dead if they did not romp and shout," said Marianne, much amused. "Good-by, my dear. I will go to see you when I can get about."

The months of March and April proved superb, and all went well with Marianne. Thus the lonely little house, nestling amid foliage, was ever joyous. Each Sunday in particular proved a joy, for the father did not then have to go to his office. On the other days he started off early in the morning, and returned about seven o'clock, ever busily laden with work in the interval. And if his constant perambulations did not affect his good-humor, he was

nevertheless often haunted by thoughts of the future. Formerly he had never been alarmed by the penury of his little home. Never had he indulged in any dream of ambition or wealth. Besides, he knew that his wife's only idea of happiness, like his own, was to live there in very simple fashion, leading a brave life of health, peacefulness, and love. But while he did not desire the power procured by a high position and the enjoyment offered by a large fortune, he could not help asking himself how he was to provide, were it ever so modestly, for his increasing family. What would he be able to do, should he have other children; how would he procure the necessaries of life each time that a fresh birth might impose fresh requirements upon him? One situated as he was must create resources, draw food from the earth step by step, each time a little mouth opened and cried its hunger aloud. Otherwise he would be guilty of criminal improvidence. And such reflections as these came upon him the more strongly as his penury had increased since the birth of Gervais – to such a point, indeed, that Marianne, despite prodigies of economy, no longer knew how to make her money last her till the end of the month. The slightest expenditure had to be debated; the very butter had to be spread thinly on the children's bread; and they had to continue wearing their blouses till they were well-nigh threadbare. To increase the embarrassment they grew every year, and cost more money. It had been necessary to send the three boys to a little school at Janville, which was as yet but a small expense. But would it not be necessary to send them the

following year to a college, and where was the money for this to come from? A grave problem, a worry which grew from hour to hour, and which for Mathieu somewhat spoilt that charming spring whose advent was flowering the countryside.

The worst was that Mathieu deemed himself immured, as it were, in his position as designer at the Beauchene works. Even admitting that his salary should some day be doubled, it was not seven or eight thousand francs a year which would enable him to realize his dream of a numerous family freely and proudly growing and spreading like some happy forest, indebted solely for strength, health, and beauty to the good common mother of all, the earth, which gave to all its sap. And this was why, since his return to Janville, the earth, the soil had attracted him, detained him during his frequent walks, while he revolved vague but ever-expanding thoughts in his mind. He would pause for long minutes, now before a field of wheat, now on the verge of a leafy wood, now on the margin of a river whose waters glistened in the sunshine, and now amid the nettles of some stony moorland. All sorts of vague plans then rose within him, uncertain reveries of such vast scope, such singularity, that he had as yet spoken of them to nobody, not even his wife. Others would doubtless have mocked at him, for he had as yet but reached that dim, quivering hour when inventors feel the gust of their discovery sweep over them, before the idea that they are revolving presents itself with full precision to their minds. Yet why did he not address himself to the soil, man's everlasting provider and nurse? Why did he not

clear and fertilize those far-spreading lands, those woods, those heaths, those stretches of stony ground which were left sterile around him? Since it was just that each man should bring his contribution to the common weal, create subsistence for himself and his offspring, why should not he, at the advent of each new child, supply a new field of fertile earth which would give that child food, without cost to the community? That was his sole idea; it took no more precise shape; at the thought of realizing it he was carried off into splendid dreams.

The Froments had been in the country fully a month when one evening Marianne, wheeling Gervais's little carriage in front of her, came as far as the bridge over the Yeuse to await Mathieu, who had promised to return early. Indeed, he got there before six o'clock. And as the evening was fine, it occurred to Marianne to go as far as the Lepailleurs' mill down the river, and buy some new-laid eggs there.

"I'm willing," said Mathieu. "I'm very fond of their romantic old mill, you know; though if it were mine I should pull it down and build another one with proper appliances."

In the yard of the picturesque old building, half covered with ivy, with its mossy wheel slumbering amid water-lilies, they found the Lepailleurs, the man tall, dry, and carroty, the woman as carroty and as dry as himself, but both of them young and hardy. Their child Antonin was sitting on the ground, digging a hole with his little hands.

"Eggs?" La Lepailleur exclaimed; "yes, certainly, madame,

there must be some."

She made no haste to fetch them, however, but stood looking at Gervais, who was asleep in his little vehicle.

"Ah! so that's your last. He's plump and pretty enough, I must say," she remarked.

But Lepailleur raised a derisive laugh, and with the familiarity which the peasant displays towards the bourgeois whom he knows to be hard up, he said: "And so that makes you five, monsieur. Ah, well! that would be a deal too many for poor folks like us."

"Why?" Mathieu quietly inquired. "Haven't you got this mill, and don't you own fields, to give labor to the arms that would come and whose labor would double and treble your produce?"

These simple words were like a whipstroke that made Lepailleur rear. And once again he poured forth all his spite. Ah! surely now, it wasn't his tumble-down old mill that would ever enrich him, since it had enriched neither his father nor his grandfather. And as for his fields, well, that was a pretty dowry that his wife had brought him, land in which nothing more would grow, and which, however much one might water it with one's sweat, did not even pay for manuring and sowing.

"But in the first place," resumed Mathieu, "your mill ought to be repaired and its old mechanism replaced, or, better still, you should buy a good steam-engine."

"Repair the mill! Buy an engine! Why, that's madness," the other replied. "What would be the use of it? As it is, people

hereabouts have almost renounced growing corn, and I remain idle every other month."

"And then," continued Mathieu, "if your fields yield less, it is because you cultivate them badly, following the old routine, without proper care or appliances or artificial manure."

"Appliances! Artificial manure! All that humbug which has only sent poor folks to rack and ruin! Ah! I should just like to see you trying to cultivate the land better, and make it yield what it'll never yield any more."

Thereupon he quite lost his temper, became violent and brutal, launching against the ungrateful earth all the charges which his love of idleness and his obstinacy suggested. He had travelled, he had fought in Africa as a soldier, folks could not say that he had always lived in his hole like an ignorant beast. But, none the less, on leaving his regiment he had lost all taste for work and come to the conclusion that agriculture was doomed, and would never give him aught but dry bread to eat. The land would soon be bankrupt, and the peasantry no longer believed in it, so old and empty and worn out had it become. And even the sun got out of order nowadays; they had snow in July and thunderstorms in December, a perfect upsetting of seasons, which wrecked the crops almost before they were out of the ground.

"No, monsieur," said Lepailleur, "what you say is impossible; it's all past. The soil and work, there's nothing left of either. It's barefaced robbery, and though the peasant may kill himself with labor, he will soon be left without even water to drink. Children

indeed! No, no! There's Antonin, of course, and for him we may just be able to provide. But I assure you that I won't even make Antonin a peasant against his will! If he takes to schooling and wishes to go to Paris, I shall tell him that he's quite right, for Paris is nowadays the only chance for sturdy chaps who want to make a fortune. So he will be at liberty to sell everything, if he chooses, and try his luck there. The only thing that I regret is that I didn't make the venture myself when there was still time."

Mathieu began to laugh. Was it not singular that he, a bourgeois with a bachelor's degree and scientific attainments, should dream of coming back to the soil, to the common mother of all labor and wealth, when this peasant, sprung from peasants, cursed and insulted the earth, and hoped that his son would altogether renounce it? Never had anything struck him as more significant. It symbolized that disastrous exodus from the rural districts towards the towns, an exodus which year by year increased, unhinging the nation and reducing it to anaemia.

"You are wrong," he said in a jovial way so as to drive all bitterness from the discussion. "Don't be unfaithful to the earth; she's an old mistress who would revenge herself. In your place I would lay myself out to obtain from her, by increase of care, all that I might want. As in the world's early days, she is still the great fruitful spouse, and she yields abundantly when she is loved in proper fashion."

But Lepailleur, raising his fists, retorted: "No, no; I've had enough of her!"

"And, by the way," continued Mathieu, "one thing which astonishes me is that no courageous, intelligent man has ever yet come forward to do something with all that vast abandoned estate yonder – that Chantebled – which old Seguin, formerly, dreamt of turning into a princely domain. There are great stretches of waste land, woods which one might partly fell, heaths and moorland which might easily be restored to cultivation. What a splendid task! What a work of creation for a bold man to undertake!"

This so amazed Lepailleur that he stood there openmouthed. Then his jeering spirit asserted itself: "But, my dear sir – excuse my saying it – you must be mad! Cultivate Chantebled, clear those stony tracts, wade about in those marshes! Why, one might bury millions there without reaping a single bushel of oats! It's a cursed spot, which my grandfather's father saw such as it is now, and which my grandson's son will see just the same. Ah! well, I'm not inquisitive, but it would really amuse me to meet the fool who might attempt such madness."

"*Mon Dieu*, who knows?" Mathieu quietly concluded. "When one only loves strongly one may work miracles."

La Lepailleur, after going to fetch a dozen eggs, now stood erect before her husband in admiration at hearing him talk so eloquently to a bourgeois. They agreed very well together in their avaricious rage at being unable to amass money by the handful without any great exertion, and in their ambition to make their son a gentleman, since only a gentleman could become wealthy.

And thus, as Marianne was going off after placing the eggs under a cushion in Gervais' little carriage, the other complacently called her attention to Antonin, who, having made a hole in the ground, was now spitting into it.

"Oh! he's smart," said she; "he knows his alphabet already, and we are going to put him to school. If he takes after his father he will be no fool, I assure you."

It was on a Sunday, some ten days later, that the supreme revelation, the great flash of light which was to decide his life and that of those he loved, fell suddenly upon Mathieu during a walk he took with his wife and the children. They had gone out for the whole afternoon, taking a little snack with them in order that they might share it amid the long grass in the fields. And after scouring the paths, crossing the copses, rambling over the moorland, they came back to the verge of the woods and sat down under an oak. Thence the whole expanse spread out before them, from the little pavilion where they dwelt to the distant village of Janville. On their right was the great marshy plateau, from which broad, dry, sterile slopes descended; while lower ground stretched away on their left. Then, behind them, spread the woods with deep thickets parted by clearings, full of herbage which no scythe had ever touched. And not a soul was to be seen around them; there was naught save wild Nature, grandly quiescent under the bright sun of that splendid April day. The earth seemed to be dilating with all the sap amassed within it, and a flood of life could be felt rising and quivering in the

vigorous trees, the spreading plants, and the impetuous growth of brambles and nettles which stretched invadingly over the soil. And on all sides a powerful, pungent odor was diffused.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.