

Zibeline — Complete eBook

Zibeline — Complete

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Page 1

ALEXANDRE-PHILIPPE-REGNIER DE MASSA

Marquis de Massa, soldier, composer, and French dramatist, was born in Paris, December 5, 1831. He selected the military career and received a commission in the cavalry after leaving the school of St. Cyr. He served in the Imperial Guards, took part in the Italian and Franco-German Wars and was promoted Chief of Squadron, Fifth Regiment, Chasseurs a Cheval, September 10, 1871. Having tendered his resignation from active service, he was appointed a lieutenant-colonel in the territorial army February 3, 1880. He has been decorated with the Legion of Honor.

The Marquis de Massa is known as a composer of music and as a dramatic author and novelist. At the Opera Comique there was represented in 1861 *Royal-Cravate*, written by him. Fragments of two operas by him were performed at the Paris Conservatory of Music in 1865, and in 1868. The list of his principal plays follows: 'Le Service en campagne, comedy (1882); *La Cicatrice*, comedy (1885); *Au Mont Ida*, Fronsac a La Bastille, and *La Coeur de Paris*, all in 1887; *La Czarine* and *Brouille depuis Magenta* (1888), and *La Bonne Aventure*—all comedies—1889. Together with Petipa he also wrote a ballet *Le Roi d'Yvetot* (1866); music by Charles Labarre. He further wrote *Zibeline*, a most brilliant romance (1892) with an Introduction by Jules Claretie; crowned by the Academie Francaise. This odd and dainty little story has a heroine of striking originality, in character and exploits. Her real name is Valentine de Vermont, and she is the daughter of a fabulously wealthy French-American dealer in furs, and when, after his death, she goes to Paris to spend her colossal fortune, and to make restitution to the man from whom her father won at play the large sum that became the foundation of his wealth, certain lively Parisian ladies, envying her her rich furs, gave her the name of *Zibeline*, that of a very rare, almost extinct, wild animal. *Zibeline's* American unconventionality, her audacity, her wealth, and generosity, set all Paris by the ears. There are fascinating glimpses into the drawing-rooms of the most exclusive Parisian society, and also into the historic greenroom of the Comedie Francaise, on a brilliant "first night." The man to whom she makes graceful restitution of his fortune is a hero of the Franco-Mexican and Franco-Prussian wars, and when she gives him back his property, she throws her heart in with the gift. The story is an interesting study of a brilliant and unconventional American girl as seen by the eyes of a clever Frenchman.

Later came 'La Revue quand meme, comedy, (1894); *Souvenirs et Impressions* (1897); *La Revue retrospective*, comedy (1899); and *Sonnets*' the same year.

Paul HERVIEU
de l'Academe Francaise.

LETTER FROM JULES CLARETIE TO THE AUTHOR

My dear friend:



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I have often declared that I never would write prefaces! But how can one resist a fine fellow who brings one an attractive manuscript, signed with a name popular among all his friends, who asks of one, in the most engaging way, an opinion on the same—then a word, a simple word of introduction, like a signal to saddle?

I have read your *Zibeline*, my dear friend, and this romance—your first—has given me a very keen pleasure. You told me once that you felt a certain timidity in publishing it. Reassure yourself immediately. A man can not be regarded as a novice when he has known, as you have, all the Parisian literary world so long; or rather, perhaps, I may more accurately say, he is always a novice when he tastes for the first time the intoxication of printer's ink.

You have the quickest of wits and the least possible affectation of gravity, and you have made as well known in Mexico as in Paris your couplets on the end of the Mexican conflict with France. 'Tout Mexico y passera!' Where are they, the 'tol-de-rols' of autumn?

Yesterday I found, in a volume of dramatic criticism by that terrible and charming Jules Barbey d'Aureville, an appreciation of one of your comedies which bears a title very appropriate to yourself: 'Honor.' "And this play does him honor," said Barbey d'Aureville, "because it is charming, light, and supple, written in flowing verse, the correctness of which does not rob it of its grace."

That which the critic said of your comedy I will say of your romance. It is a pretty fairy-story—all about Parisian fairies, for a great many fairies live in Paris! In fact, more are to be found there than anywhere else! There are good fairies and bad fairies among them. Your own particular fairy is good and she is charming. I am tempted to ask whether you have drawn your characters from life. That is a question which was frequently put to me recently, after I had published '*L'Americaine*.' The public longs to possess keys to our books. It is not sufficient for them that a romance is interesting; it must possess also a spice of scandal.

Portraits? You have not drawn any—neither in the drawing-rooms where *Zibeline* scintillates, nor in the foyer of the Comedie Francaise, where for so long a time you have felt yourself at home. Your women are visions and not studies from life—and I do not believe that you will object to my saying this.

You should not dislike the "romantic romance," which every one in these days advises us to write—as if that style did not begin as far back as the birth of romance itself: as if the Princess of Cleves had not written, and as if Balzac himself, the great realist, had not invented, the finest "romantic romances" that can be found—for example, the amorous adventure of General de Montriveau and the Duchesse de Langlais!



Apropos, in your charming story there is a General who pleases me very much. How was it that you did not take, after the fashion of Paul de Molenes, a dashing cavalry officer for your hero?—you, for whom the literary cavalier has all the attractions of a gentleman and a soldier?



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Nothing could be more piquant, alert, chivalrous—in short, worthy of a Frenchman—than the departure of your hero for the war after that dramatic card-party, which was also a battle—and what a battle!—where, at the end of the conflict, he left his all upon the green cloth. That is an attractive sketch of the amiable comedienne, who wishes for fair weather and a smooth sea for the soldier lover who is going so far away. It seems to me that I have actually known that pretty girl at some time or another! That chapter is full of the perfume of pearl powder and iris! It is only a story, of course, but it is a magnificent story, which will please many readers.

The public will ask you to write others, be sure of that; and you will do well, my dear friend, for your own sake and for ours, to follow the precept of Denis Diderot: “My friends, write stories; while one writes them he amuses himself, and the story of life goes on, and that is less gay than the stories we can tell.”

I do not know precisely whether these last words, which are slightly pessimistic, are those of the good Diderot himself. But they are those of a Parisian of 1892, who has been able to forget his cares and annoyances in reading the story that you have told so charmingly.

With much affection to you, and wishing good luck to Zibeline, I am

Your friend,

Jules Claretie

de l'Academie Francaise.

April 26, 1892.

ZIBELINE

BOOK 1

CHAPTER I

LES FRERES-PROVENCAUX

In the days of the Second Empire, the Restaurant des Freres-Provencaux still enjoyed a wide renown to which its fifty years of existence had contributed more than a little to heighten its fame.

This celebrated establishment was situated near the Beaujolais Gallery of the Palais-Royal, close to the narrow street leading to the Rue Vivienne, and it had been the rendezvous of epicures, either residents of Paris or birds of passage, since the day it was opened.



On the ground floor was the general dining-room, the gathering-place for honest folk from the provinces or from other lands; the next floor had been divided into a succession of private rooms, comfortably furnished, where, screened behind thick curtains, dined somewhat "irregular" patrons: lovers who were in either the dawn, the zenith, or the decline of their often ephemeral fancies. On the top floor, spacious salons, richly decorated, were used for large and elaborate receptions of various kinds.

At times the members of certain social clubs gave in these rooms subscription balls of anacreontic tendencies, the feminine element of which was recruited among the popular gay favorites of the period. Occasionally, also, young fellows about town, of different social rank, but brought together by a pursuit of amusement in common, met here on neutral ground, where, after a certain hour, the supper-table was turned into a gaming-table, enlivened by the clinking of glasses and the rattle of the croupier's rake, and where to the excitement of good cheer was added that of high play, with its alternations of unexpected gains and disastrous losses.

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It was at a reunion of this kind, on the last evening in the month of May, 1862, that the salons on the top floor were brilliantly illuminated. A table had been laid for twenty persons, who were to join in a banquet in honor of the winner of the great military steeplechase at La Marche, which had taken place a few days before. The victorious gentleman-rider was, strange to say, an officer of infantry—an unprecedented thing in the annals of this sport.

Heir to a seigneurial estate, which had been elevated to a marquisate in the reign of Louis XII, son of a father who had the strictest notions as to the preservation of pure blood, Henri de Prerolles, early initiated into the practice of the breaking and training of horses, was at eighteen as bold and dashing a rider as he was accomplished in other physical exercises; and although, three years later, at his debut at St. Cyr, he expressed no preference for entering the cavalry service, for which his early training and rare aptitude fitted him, it was because, in the long line of his ancestors—which included a marshal of France and a goodly number of lieutenants-general—all, without exception, from Ravenna to Fontenoy, had won renown as commanders of infantry.

At the outbreak of the French Revolution, Henri's grandfather, who had distinguished himself in the American War for Independence, left his native land only when he was in the last extremity. As soon as circumstances permitted, he reentered France with his son, upon whom Napoleon conferred a brevet rank, which the recipient accepted of his free will. He began his military experience in Spain, returned safe and well from the retreat from Russia, and fought valiantly at Bautzen and at Dresden. The Restoration—by which time he had become chief of his battalion—could not fail to advance his career; and the line was about to have another lieutenant-general added to its roll, when the events of 1830 decided Field-Marshal the Marquis de Prerolles to sheathe his sword forever, and to withdraw to his own estate, near the forest of l'Ile-d'Adam, where hunting and efforts toward the improvement of the equine race occupied his latter years.

He died in 1860, a widower, leaving two children: Jeanne, recently married to the Duc de Montgeron, and his son Henri, then a pupil in a military school, who found himself, on reaching his majority, in possession of the chateau and domains of Prerolles, the value of which was from fifteen to eighteen hundred thousand francs.

Having been made sub-lieutenant by promotion on the first day of October, 1861, the young Marquis, already the head of his house and a military leader, asked and obtained the favor of being incorporated with a battalion of chasseurs garrisoned at Vincennes.

Exact in the performance of his military duties, and at the same time ardent in the pursuit of pleasure, he was able, thanks to his robust health, to conciliate the exigencies of the one with the fatigues of the other.



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Unfortunately, Henri was fond of gaming, and his natural impetuosity, which showed itself by an emulation of high standards in his military duties, degenerated into recklessness before the baccarat-table. At the end of eighteen months, play, and an expensive liaison with an actress, had absorbed half his fortune, and his paternal inheritance had been mortgaged as well. The actress was a favorite in certain circles and had been very much courted; and this other form of rivalry, springing from the glitter of the footlights, added so much the more fuel to the prodigalities of the inflammable young officer.

Affairs were in this situation when, immediately after Henri's triumph at the race-track, a bettor on the opposite side paid one of his wagers by offering to the victor a grand dinner at the Freres-Provencaux.

CHAPTER II

BIRDS OF PREY

The hero of the night was seated at the middle of one side of the table, in the place of honor. For his 'vis-a-vis' he had his lively friend Fanny Dorville, star of the Palais Royal, while at his right sat Heloise Viot, the "first old woman," or duenna, of the same theatre, whose well known jests and eccentricities added their own piquancy to gay life in Paris. The two artists, being compelled to appear in the after-piece at their theatre that evening, had come to the dinner made up and in full stage costume, ready to appear behind the footlights at the summons of the call-boy.

The other guests were young men accustomed to the surroundings of the weighing-stand and the betting-room, at a time when betting had not yet become a practice of the masses; and most of them felt highly honored to rub elbows with a nobleman of ancient lineage, as was Henri de Prerolles.

Among these persons was Andre Desvanneaux, whose father, a churchwarden at *Ste.-Clotilde*, had attained a certain social prestige by his good works, and Paul Landry, in his licentiate in a large banking house in Paris. The last named was the son of a ship-owner at Havre, and his character was ambitious and calculating. He cherished, under a quiet demeanor, a strong hope of being able to supply, by the rapid acquisition of a fortune, the deficiencies of his inferior birth, from which his secret vanity suffered severely. Being an expert in all games of chance, he had already accumulated, while waiting for some brilliant coup, enough to lead a life of comparative elegance, thus giving a certain satisfaction to his instincts. He and Henri de Prerolles never yet had played cards together, but the occasion was sure to come some day, and Paul Landry had desired it a long time.



The company, a little silent at first, was becoming somewhat more animated, when a head-waiter, correct, and full of a sense of his own importance, entered the salon, holding out before him with both hands a large tray covered with slender glasses filled with a beverage called "the cardinal's drink," composed of champagne, Bordeaux, and slices of pineapple. The method of blending these materials was a professional secret of the Freres-Provencaux.



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Instantly the guests were on their feet, and Heloise, who had been served first, proposed that they should drink the health of the Marquis, but, prompted by one of her facetious impulses, instead of lifting the glass to her own lips, she presented it to those of the waiter, and, raising her arm, compelled him to swallow the contents. Encouraged by laughter and applause, she presented to him a second glass, then a third; and the unhappy man drank obediently, not being able to push away the glasses without endangering the safety of the tray he carried.

Fanny Dorville interceded in vain for the victim; the inexorable duenna had already seized a fourth glass, and the final catastrophe would have been infallibly brought about, had not providence intervened in the person of the call-boy, who, thrusting his head through the half-open doorway, cried, shrilly:

“Ladies, they are about to begin!”

The two actresses hastened away, escorted by Andre Desvanneaux, a modern Tartufe, who, though married, was seen everywhere, as much at home behind the scenes as in church.

Coffee and liqueurs were then served in a salon adjoining the large dining-room, which gave the effect of a private club-room to this part of the restaurant.

Cigars were lighted, and conversation soon turned on feminine charms and the performances of various horses, particularly those of Franc-Comtois, the winner of the military steeplechase. This animal was one of the products of the Prerolles stud, and was ordinary enough on flat ground, but a jumper of the first rank.

At last the clock struck the half hour after eleven, and some of the guests had already manifested their intention to depart, when Paul Landry, who had been rather silent until then, said, carelessly:

“You expect to sleep to-night in Paris, no doubt, Monsieur de Prerolles?”

“Oh, no,” Henri replied, “I am on duty this week, and am obliged to return to Vincennes early in the morning. So I shall stay here until it is time for me to go.”

“In that case, might we not have a game of cards?” proposed Captain Constantin Lenaieff, military attache to the suite of the Russian ambassador.

“As you please,” said Henri.

This proposal decided every one to remain. The company returned to the large dining-room, which, in the mean time, had been again transformed into a gaming-hall, with the usual accessories: a frame for the tally-sheet, a metal bowl to hold rejected playing-



cards set in one end of the table, and, placed at intervals around it, were tablets on which the punter registered the amount of the stakes.

On reentering this apartment, Henri de Prerolles approached a sort of counter, and, drawing from his pocket thirty thousand francs in bank-notes, he exchanged them for their value in mother-of-pearl "chips" of different sizes, representing sums from one to five, ten, twenty-five, or a hundred louis. Paul Landry took twenty-five thousand francs' worth; Constantin Unaieff, fifteen thousand; the others, less fortunate or more prudent, took smaller sums; and about midnight the game began.



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CHAPTER III

THE GAME

It began quietly enough, the two principal players waiting, before making any bold strokes, to see how the luck should run. The first victory was in favor of Henri, who, at the end of a hand dealt by Constantin Lenaieff, had won about three hundred Louis. Just at this moment the two women returned, accompanied by Desvanneaux.

"I had some difficulty in persuading our charming friends to return," said he; "Mademoiselle Dorville was determined that some one should escort her to her own house."

"You, perhaps, Desvanneaux," said Henri, twisting up the ends of his moustache.

"Not at all," said Fanny; "I wished Heloise to go with me. I have noticed that when I am here you always lose. I fear I have the evil eye."

"Say, rather, that you have no stomach," said Heloise. "Had you made your debut, as I made mine, with Frederic Lemaitre in 'Thirty Years in the Life of an Actor'?"

"It certainly would not rejuvenate her," said Henri, finishing the sentence.

"Marquis, you are very impertinent," said the duenna, laughing. "As a penalty, you must lend me five louis."

"With the greatest pleasure."

"Thank you!"

And, as a new hand was about to be dealt, Heloise seated herself at one of the tables. This time Paul Landry put fifteen thousand francs in the bank.

"Will you do me the favor to cut the cards?" he asked of Fanny, who stood behind Henri's chair.

"What! in spite of my evil eye, Monsieur?"

"I do not fear that, Mademoiselle. Your eyes have always been too beautiful for one of them to change now."

Stale as was this compliment, it had the desired effect, and the young woman thrust vertically into the midst of the pack the cards he held out to her.

"Play, messieurs," said the banker.



“Messieurs and Madame,” corrected Heloise, placing her five chips before her, while Henri, at the other table, staked the six thousand francs which he had just won.

“Don’t put up more than there is in the bank,” objected Paul Landry, throwing a keen glance at the stakes. Having assured himself that on the opposing side to this large sum there were hardly thirty louis, he dealt the cards.

“Eight!” said he, laying down his card.

“Nine!” said Heloise.

“Baccarat!” said Henri, throwing two court-cards into the basket.

The rake rattled on the losing table, but after the small stakes of the winners had been paid, the greater part of the six thousand francs passed into the hands of the banker.

Five times in succession, at the first deal, the same thing happened; and at the sixth round Heloise won six hundred francs, and Henri found himself with no more counters.

“This is the proper moment to retire!” said the duenna, rising from the table. “Are you coming, Fanny?”



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"I beg you, let us go now," murmured Mademoiselle Dorville in the ear of her lover.

Her voice was caressing and full of tender promise. The young man hesitated an instant. But to desert the game at his first loss seemed to him an act unworthy of his reputation, and, as between love and pride, the latter finally prevailed.

"I have only an hour or two more to wait. Can not you go home by yourself?" he replied to Fanny's appeal, while Heloise exchanged her counters for tinkling coin, forgetting, no doubt, to reimburse her creditor, who, in fact, gave no thought to the matter.

Henri accompanied the two women to a coach at the door, which had been engaged by the thoughtful and obliging Desvanneaux; and, pressing tenderly the hand of his mistress, he murmured:

"Till to-morrow!"

"To-morrow!" she echoed, her heart oppressed with sad forebodings.

Desvanneaux, whose wife was very jealous of him, made all haste to regain his conjugal abode.

CHAPTER IV

THE RESULT

Meanwhile, Paul Landry had begun badly, and had had some ill turns of luck; nevertheless, feeling that his fortune was about to change, he raised the stakes.

"Does any one take him up?" asked Constantin Lenaeiff.

"I do," said De Prerolles, who had returned to the table.

And, seizing a pencil that lay on the card-table, he signed four cheques of twenty-five thousand francs each. Unfortunately for him, the next hand was disastrous. The stakes were increased, and the bank was broken several times, when Paul Landry, profiting by a heavy gain, doubled and redoubled the preceding stakes, and beheld mounting before him a pile of cheques and counters.

But, as often happens in such circumstances, his opponent, Henri de Prerolles, persisted in his vain battle against ill-luck, until at three o'clock in the morning, controlling his shaken nerves and throwing down his cards, without any apparent anger, he said:

"Will you tell me, gentlemen, how much I owe you?"



After all accounts had been reckoned, he saw that he had lost two hundred and ninety thousand francs, of which two hundred and sixty thousand in cheques belonged to Paul Landry, and the thirty thousand francs' balance to the bank.

"Monsieur de Prerolles," said Paul Landry, hypocritically, "I am ashamed to win such a sum from you. If you wish to seek your revenge at some other game, I am entirely at your service."

The Marquis looked at the clock, calculated that he had still half an hour to spare, and, not more for the purpose of "playing to the gallery" than in the hope of reducing the enormous sum of his indebtedness, he replied:

"Will it be agreeable to you to play six hands of bezique?"

"Certainly, Monsieur. How much a point?"

"Ten francs, if that is not too much."



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“Not at all! I was about to propose that amount myself.”

A quick movement of curiosity ran through the assembly, and a circle was formed around the two opponents in this exciting match.

Every one knows that bezique is played with four packs of cards, and that the number of points may be continued indefinitely. The essential thing is to win at least one thousand points at the end of each hand; unless a player does this he is said to “pass the Rubicon,” becoming twice a loser—that is, the victor adds to his own score the points lost by his adversary. Good play, therefore, consists largely in avoiding the “Rubicon” and in remaining master of the game to the last trick, in order to force one’s adversary over the “Rubicon,” if he stands in danger of it. The first two hands were lost by Landry, who, having each time approached the “Rubicon,” succeeded in avoiding it only by the greatest skill and prudence. Immediately his opponent, still believing that good luck must return to him, began to neglect the smaller points in order to make telling strokes, but he became stranded at the very port of success, as it were; so that, deducting the amount of his first winning, he found at the end of the fifth hand that he had lost six thousand points. Notwithstanding his wonderful self-control, it was not without difficulty that the young officer preserved a calm demeanor under the severe blows dealt him by Fortune. Paul Landry, always master of himself, lowered his eyes that their expression of greedy and merciless joy should not be seen. The nearer the game drew to its conclusion, the closer pressed the circle of spectators, and in the midst of a profound silence the last hand began. Favored from the beginning with the luckiest cards, followed by the most fortunate returns, Paul Landry scored successively “forty, bezique,” five hundred and fifteen hundred. He lacked two cards to make the highest point possible, but Henri, by their absence from his own hand, could measure the peril that menaced him. So, surveying the number of cards that remained in stock, he guarded carefully three aces of trumps which might help him to avert disaster. But, playing the only ace that would allow him to score again, Paul Landry announced coldly, laying on the table four queens of spades and four knaves of diamonds:

“Four thousand five hundred!” This was the final stroke. The last hand had wiped out, by eight thousand points, the possessions of Landry’s adversary. The former losses of the unfortunate Marquis were now augmented by one hundred and forty thousand francs. Henri became very pale, but, summoning all his pride to meet the glances of the curious, he arose, rang a bell, and called for a pen and a sheet of stamped paper. Then, turning to Paul Landry, he said, calmly “Monsieur, I owe you four hundred thousand francs. Debts of honor are payable within twenty-four hours, but in order to realize this sum, I shall require more time. How long a delay will you grant me?”



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“As long as you wish, Monsieur.”

“I thank you. I ask a month.”

A waiter appeared, bringing the pen and paper.

“Oh, your word will be sufficient for me,” said Landry.

“Pardon me!” said the Marquis. “One never knows what may happen. I insist that you shall accept a formal acknowledgment of the debt.”

And he wrote:

“I, the undersigned, acknowledge that I owe to Monsieur Paul Landry the sum of four hundred thousand francs, which I promise to pay in thirty days, counting from this date.”

He dated, signed, and folded the paper, and handed it to Paul Landry. Then, glancing at the clock, whose hands pointed to a quarter before four, he said:

“Permit me to take leave of you, gentlemen. I have barely time to reach Vincennes before roll-call.”

He lighted a cigar, saluted the astonished assembly with perfect coolness, slowly descended the stairs, and jumped into his carriage, the chasseur of the restaurant holding open the door for him.

“To Vincennes!” he cried to the coachman; “and drive like the devil!”

CHAPTER V

A DESPERATE RESOLUTION

The chimneys and roofs of the tall houses along the boulevards stood out sharp and clear in the light of the rising sun. Here and there squads of street-cleaners appeared, and belated hucksters urged their horses toward the markets; but except for these, the streets were deserted, and the little coupe that carried Caesar and his misfortunes rolled rapidly toward the Barriere du Trone.

With all the coach-windows lowered, in order to admit the fresh morning air, the energetic nobleman, buffeted by ill-luck, suddenly raised his head and steadily looked in the face the consequences of his defeat. He, too, could say that all was lost save honor; and already, from the depths of his virile soul, sprang the only resolution that seemed to him worthy of himself.



When he entered his own rooms in order to dress, his mind was made up; and although, during the military exercises that morning, his commands were more abrupt than usual, no one would have suspected that his mind was preoccupied by any unusual trouble.

He decided to call upon his superior officer that afternoon to request from him authorization to seek an exchange for Africa. Then he went quietly to breakfast at the pension of the officers of his own rank, who, observing his calm demeanor, in contrast to their own, knew that he must be unaware of the important news just published in the morning journals. General de Lorencez, after an unsuccessful attack upon the walls of Puebla, had been compelled to retreat toward Orizaba, and to intrench there while waiting for reenforcements.

This military event awakened the liveliest discussions, and in the midst of the repast a quartermaster entered to announce the reply to the report, first presenting his open register to the senior lieutenant.



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“Ah! By Jove, fellows! what luck!” cried that officer, joyously.

“What is it?” demanded the others in chorus.

“Listen to this!” And he read aloud: “General Order: An expedition corps, composed of two divisions of infantry, under the command of General Forey, is in process of forming, in order to be sent to Mexico on urgent business. The brigade of the advance guard will be composed of the First Regiment of Zouaves and the Eighteenth Battalion of infantry. As soon as these companies shall be prepared for war, this battalion will proceed by the shortest route to Toulon; thence they will embark aboard the Imperial on the twenty-sixth day of June next.”

Arousing cheer drowned the end of the reading of this bulletin, the tenor of which gave to Henri's aspirations an immediate and more advantageous prospect immediate, because, as his company was the first to march, he was assured of not remaining longer at the garrison; more advantageous, because the dangers of a foreign expedition opened a much larger field for his chances of promotion.

Consequently, less than a month remained to him in which to settle his indebtedness. After the reading of the bulletin, he asked one of his brother officers to take his place until evening, caught the first train to town, and, alighting at the Bastille, went directly to the Hotel de Montgeron, where he had temporary quarters whenever he chose to use them.

“Is the Duke at home?” he inquired of the Swiss.

Receiving an affirmative reply, he crossed the courtyard, and was soon announced to his brother-in-law, the noble proprietor of La Sarthe, deputy of the Legitimist opposition to the Corps Legislatif of the Empire.

The Duc de Montgeron listened in silence to his relative's explanation of his situation. When the recital was finished, without uttering a syllable he opened a drawer, drew out a legal paper, and handed it to Henri, saying:

“This is my marriage contract. Read it, and you will see that I have had, from the head of my family, three hundred and fifteen thousand livres income. I do not say this to you in order to contrast my riches with your ruin, but only to prove to you that I was perfectly well able to marry your sister even had she possessed no dot. That dot yields seven hundred and fifteen thousand francs' income, at three per cent. We were married under the law of community of goods, which greatly simplifies matters when husband and wife have, as have Jeanne and myself, but one heart and one way of looking at things. To consult her would be, perhaps, to injure her. To-morrow I will sell the necessary stock, and ere the end of the week Monsieur Durand, your notary and ours, shall hold at your disposal the amount of the sum you lost last night.”

The blood rose to the cheeks of the young officer.



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“I—I” he stammered, pressing convulsively the hands of his brother-in-law. “Shall I let you pay the ransom for my madness and folly? Shall I a second time despoil my sister, already robbed by me of one half her rightful share? I should die of shame! Or, rather—wait a moment! Let us reverse our situations for an instant, and if you will swear to me that, were you in my place, you would accept—Ah, you see! You hesitate as much now as you hesitated little a moment ago in your simple and cordial burst of generosity: Consequently, I refuse!”

“What do you mean to do, then?”

“To sell Prerolles immediately-to-day, if possible. This determination troubles you because of the grief it will cause Jeanne. It will grieve me, too. And the courage to tell this to her is the only effort to which my strength is unequal. Only you can tell it in such a way as to soften the blow—”

“I will try to do it,” said the Duke.

“I thank you! As to the personal belongings and the family portraits, their place is at Montgeron, is it not?”

“That is understood. Now, one word more, Henri.”

“Speak!”

“Have you not another embarrassment to settle?”

“I have indeed, and the sooner the better. Unhappily—”

“You have not enough money,” finished the Duke. “I have received this morning twenty-five thousand francs’ rent from my farms. Will you allow me to lend them to you?”

“To be repaid from the price of the sale? Very willingly, this time.”

And he placed in an envelope the notes handed him by his brother-in-law.

“This is the last will and testament of love,” said the Marquis, as he departed, to give the necessary instructions to his notary.

CHAPTER VI

THE FAREWELL

His debts were easily reckoned. He owed eight hundred thousand francs to the Credit Foncier; four hundred thousand to Paul Landry; more than one hundred thousand to



various jewellers and shopkeepers; twenty-five thousand to the Duc de Montgeron. It was necessary to sell the chateau and the property at one million four hundred thousand francs, and the posters advertising the sale must be displayed without delay.

Then he must say farewell to Fanny Dorville. Nothing should disturb a sensible mind; the man who, with so much resolution, deprives himself of his patrimonial estates should not meet less bravely the separation imposed by necessity.

As soon as Henri appeared in Fanny's boudoir, she divined that her presentiments of the previous night had not deceived her.

"You have lost heavily?" she asked.

"Very heavily," he replied, kissing her brow.

"And it was my fault!" she cried. "I brought you bad luck, and that wretch of a Landry knew well what he was about when he made me cut the cards that brought you misfortune!"



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“No, no, my dear—listen! The only one in fault was I, who allowed myself, through false pride, to be persuaded that I should not seem to fear him.”

“Fear him—a professional gambler, who lives one knows not how! Nonsense! It is as if one should fight a duel with a fencing-master.”

“What do you wish, my dear? The evil is done—and it is so great—”

“That you have not the means to pay the sum? Oh, but wait a moment.”

And taking up a casket containing a superb collar of pearls, she said:

“This is worth fourteen thousand francs. You may well take them from me, since it was you that gave them to me.”

No doubt, she had read De Musset, and this action was perhaps a reflection of that of Marion, but the movement was sincere. Something of the stern pride of this other Rolla was stirred; a sob swelled his bosom, and two tears—those tears that rise to a soldier’s eyes in the presence of nobility and goodness—fell from his eyes upon the hair of the poor girl.

“I have not come to that yet,” he said, after a short silence. “But we must part—”

“You are about to marry?” she cried.

“Oh, no!”

“Ah, so much the better!”

In a few words he told her of his approaching departure, and said that he must devote all his remaining time to the details of the mobilization of troops.

“So—it is all over!” said Fanny, sadly. “But fear nothing! I have courage, and even if I have the evil eye at play, I know of something that brings success in war. Will you accept a little fetich from me?”

“Yes, but you persist in trying to give me something,” he said, placing on a table the sealed envelope he had brought.

“How good you are!” she murmured. “Now promise me one thing: let us dine together once more. Not at the Provencaux, however. Oh, heavens! no! At the Cafe Anglais—where we dined before the play the first time we—”

The entrance of Heloise cut short the allusion to a memory of autumn.



“Ah, it is you,” said Fanny nervously. “You come apropos.”

“Is there a row in the family?” inquired Heloise.

“As if there could be!”

“What is it, then?”

“You see Henri, do you not?”

“Well, yes, I do, certainly. What then?”

“Then look at him long and well, for you will not see him again in many a day. He is going to Mexico!”

“To exploit a mine?”

“Yes, Heloise,” the officer replied, “a mine that will make the walls of Puebla totter.”

“In that case, good luck, my General!” said the duenna, presenting arms with her umbrella.

Fanny could not repress a smile in spite of her tears. Her lover seized this moment to withdraw from her arms and reach the stairs.

“And now, Marquis de Prerolles, go forth to battle!” cried the old actress to him over the banisters, with the air of an artist who knows her proper cue.



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CHAPTER VII

THE VOW

Notwithstanding the desire expressed by his mistress, Henri firmly decided not to repeat that farewell scene.

The matter that concerned him most was the wish not to depart without having freed himself wholly from his debt to Paul Landry. Fortunately, because of a kindly interest, as well as on account of the guaranty of the Duc de Montgeron, a rich friend consented to advance the sum; so that, one week before the day appointed for payment, the losing player was able to withdraw his signature from the hands of his greedy creditor.

Relieved from this anxiety, Henri had asked, the night before the day set for departure, for leave of absence for several hours, in order to visit for the last time a spot very dear to him, upon whose walls placards now hung, announcing the sale of the property to take place on the following morning.

No one received warning of this visit in extremis save the steward, who awaited his master before the gates of the chateau, the doors and windows of which had been flung wide open.

At the appointed hour the visitor appeared at the end of the avenue, advancing with a firm step between two hedges bordered with poplars, behind which several brood-mares, standing knee-deep in the rich grass, suckled their foal.

The threshold of the gate crossed, master and man skirted the lawn, traversed the garden, laid out in the French fashion, and, side by side, without exchanging a word, mounted the steps of the mansion. Entering the main hall, the Marquis, whose heart was full of memories of his childhood, stopped a long time to regard alternately the two suites of apartments that joined the vestibule to the two opposite wings. Making a sign to his companion not to follow him, Henri then entered the vast gallery, wherein hung long rows of the portraits of his ancestors; and there, baring his head before that of the Marshal of France whose name he bore, he vowed simply, without excitement, and in a low tone, either to vanquish the enemy or to add, after the manner of his forbears, a glorious page to his family's history.

The object of his pilgrimage having thus been accomplished, the Marquis ordered the steward to see that all the portraits were sent to the Chateau de Montgeron; then, after pressing his hand in farewell, he returned to the station by the road whence he had come, avoiding the village in order to escape the curious eyes of the peasantry.



CHAPTER VIII

IN SEARCH OF GLORY

The next morning the 18th battalion of 'chasseurs', in dress uniform, with knapsacks on their backs and fully armed, awaited in the Gare de Lyon the moment to board the train destined to transport them to the coast.

At a trumpet-call this movement was executed in silence, and in perfect order; and only after all the men were installed did the functionaries who kept the crowd in order take their own places in the carriages, leaving a throng of relatives and friends jostling one another upon the quay.



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Fanny Dorville and her friend the duenna tried in vain to reach the compartment wherein Henri had his place, already in marching order; the presence of the Duc and the Duchesse de Montgeron prevented the two women from approaching him. Nevertheless, at the moment when the train began to move slowly out of the station, an employee found the means to slip into the hands of the Marquis a small packet containing the little fetich which his mistress had kept for him. It was a medallion of the Holy Virgin, which had been blessed at Notre-Dame des-Victoires, and it was attached to a long gold chain.

Thirty-six hours later, on the evening of the 26th of June, the battalion embarked aboard the Imperial, which, with steam up, was due to leave the Toulon roadstead at daybreak. At the moment of getting under weigh, the officer in charge of the luggage, who was the last to leave the shore, brought several despatches aboard the ship, and handed to Lieutenant de Prerolles a telegram, which had been received the evening before at the quay.

The Marquis opened it and read: "Chateau and lands sold for 1,450,000 francs. Everything paid, 1600 francs remain disposable."

"That is to say," thought the officer, sadly, "I have my pay and barely three thousand francs' income!"

Leaning both elbows upon the taffrail, he gazed long at the shores of France, which appeared to fly toward the horizon; then, brusquely turning his eyes to the quarters filled with the strong figures and manly faces of the young foot-soldiers of the 18th battalion, he said to himself that among such men, under whatever skies or at whatever distance, one found his country—glancing aloft where floated above his head the folds of his flag.

CHAPTER IX

Twenty-three years after the events already recorded, on a cold afternoon in February, the Bois de Boulogne appeared to be draped in a Siberian mantle rarely seen at that season. A deep and clinging covering of snow hid the ground, and the prolonged freezing of the lakes gave absolute guaranty of their solidity.

A red sun, drowned in mist, threw a mild radiance over the landscape, and many pedestrians stamped their feet around the borders of the lake belonging to the Skaters' Club, and watched the hosts of pretty women descending from their carriages, delighted at the opportunity afforded them, by this return of winter, to engage in their favorite exercise.

Received on her arrival by one of the attendants posted at the entrance, each of the fair skaters entered in turn a small building reserved for ladies, whence she soon came forth



in full skating array, ready to risk herself on the ice, either alone or guided by the hand of some expert cavalier.

Here and there, around the enclosure, large garden-seats, shaped like sentry-boxes, were reserved for the mothers and sisters of the members of the club, so that they could observe, from a comfortable shelter, the evolutions of those in whom they were interested.



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Within two of these nooks, side by side, sat the Duchesse de Montgeron, president, and the Comtesse Desvanneaux, vice-president of the Charity Orphan Asylum; the latter had come to look on at the first essay on the ice of her daughter, Madame de Thomery; the former, to judge the skill of her brother, General the Marquis de Prerolles, past-master in all exercises of strength and skill.

At forty-five years of age, the young General had preserved the same grace and slenderness that had distinguished him when he had first donned the elegant tunic of an officer of chasseuys. His hair, cut rather short, had become slightly gray on his temples, but his jaunty moustache and well-trimmed beard were as yet innocent of a single silver thread. The same energy shone in his eyes, the same sonority rang in his voice, which had become slightly more brusque and authoritative from his long-continued habit of command.

In a small round hat, with his hands in the pockets of an outing-jacket, matching his knickerbockers in color, he strolled to and fro near his sister, now encouraging Madame de Thomery, hesitating on the arm of her instructor, now describing scientific flourishes on the ice, in rivalry against the crosses dashed off by Madame de Lisieux and Madame de Nointel—two other patronesses of the orphanage—the most renowned among all the fashionable skaters. This sort of tourney naturally attracted all eyes, and the idlers along the outer walks had climbed upon the paling in order to gain a better view of the evolutions, when suddenly a spectacle of another kind called their attention to the entrance-gate in their rear.

Passing through the Porte Dauphine, and driven by a young woman enveloped in furs, advanced swiftly, over the crisp snow, a light American sleigh, to which was harnessed a magnificent trotter, whose head and shoulders emerged, as from an aureole, through that flexible, circular ornament which the Russians call the 'douga'.

Having passed the last turn of the path, the driver slackened her grasp, and the horse stopped short before the entrance. His owner, throwing the reins to a groom perched up behind, sprang lightly to the ground amid a crowd of curious observers, whose interest was greatly enhanced by the sight of the odd-looking vehicle.

The late-comer presented her card of invitation to the proper functionary, and went across the enclosure toward the ladies' salon.

"Ah! there is Zibeline!" cried Madame Desvanneaux, with an affected air. "Do you know her?" she inquired of the Duchesse de Montgeron.

"Not yet," the Duchess replied. "She did not arrive in Paris until the end of spring, just at the time I was leaving town for the seashore. But I know that she says her real name is Mademoiselle de Vermont, and that she was born in Louisiana, of an old French family that emigrated to the North, and recently became rich in the fur trade—from which



circumstance Madame de Nointel has wittily named her 'Zibeline.' I know also that she is an orphan, that she has an enormous fortune, and has successively refused, I believe, all pretenders who have thus far aspired to her hand."



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“Yes—gamblers, and fortune-hunters, in whose eyes her millions excuse all her eccentricities.”

“Do I understand that she has been presented to you?” asked the Duchess, surprised.

“Well, yes—by the old Chevalier de Sainte-Foy, one of her so-called cousins—rather distant, I fancy! But the independent airs of this young lady, and her absolute lack of any respectable chaperon, have decided me to break off any relations that might throw discredit on our patriarchal house,” Madame Desvanneaux replied volubly, as ready to cross herself as if she had been speaking of the devil!

The Duchess could not repress a smile, knowing perfectly that her interlocutor had been among the first to demand for her son the hand of Mademoiselle de Vermont!

During this dialogue, the subject of it had had time to cast aside her fur cloak, to fasten upon her slender, arched feet, clad in dainty, laced boots, a pair of steel skates, with tangent blades, and without either grooves or straps, and to dart out upon this miniature sheet of water with the agility of a person accustomed to skating on the great lakes of America.

She was a brunette, with crisply waving hair, a small head, well-set, and deep yet brilliant eyes beneath arched and slightly meeting brows. Her complexion was pale, and her little aquiline nose showed thin, dilating nostrils. Her rosy lips, whose corners drooped slightly, revealed dazzling teeth, and her whole physiognomy expressed an air of haughty disdain, somewhat softened by her natural elegance.

Her cloth costume, which displayed to advantage her slender waist and graceful bust, was of simple but elegant cut, and was adorned with superb trimmings of black fox, which matched her toque and a little satin-lined muff, which from time to time she raised to her cheek to ward off the biting wind.

Perhaps her skirt was a shade too short, revealing in its undulations a trifle too much of the dainty hose; but the revelation was so shapely it would have been a pity to conceal it!

“Very bad form!” murmured Madame Desvanneaux.

“But one can not come to a place like this in a skirt with a train,” was the more charitable thought of the Duchess.

Meantime the aforesaid tournament went on in the centre of the sheet of ice, and Zibeline, without mingling with the other skaters, contented herself with skirting the borders of the lake, rapidly designing a chain of pierced hearts on the smooth surface, an appropriate symbol of her own superiority.



Annoyed to see himself eclipsed by a stranger, the General threw a challenging glance in her direction, and, striking out vigorously in a straight line, he sped swiftly toward the other end of the lake.

Stung to the quick by his glance, Mademoiselle de Vermont darted after him, passed him halfway along the course, and, wheeling around with a wide, outward curve, her body swaying low, she allowed him to pass before her, maintaining an attitude which her antagonist might interpret as a salute, courteous or ironic, as he chose.



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By this time the crowd was gradually diminishing. The daylight was waning, and a continued sound of closing gates announced the retreat of the gay world toward Paris.

Zibeline alone, taking advantage of the free field, lingered a few moments to execute some evolutions in the deepening twilight, looking like the heroines in the old ballads, half-visible, through the mists, \ to the vivid imagination of the Scottish bards.

Henri de Prerolles had entered his sister's carriage, in company with Madame Desvanneaux and Madame Thomery, and during the drive home, these two gentle dames—for the daughter was worthy of the mother—did not fail to sneer at the fair stranger, dilating particularly upon the impropriety of the challenging salute she had given to the General, with whom she was unacquainted.

“But my brother could hardly request his seconds to call upon her for that!” laughingly said the Duchess who, it seemed, had decided to defend the accused one in all attacks made upon her.

“Look! Here she comes! She is passing us again. One would think she was deliberately trying to do it!” exclaimed Madame Desvanneaux, just before their carriage reached the Arc de Triomphe.

Zibeline's sleigh, which had glided swiftly, and without hindrance, along the unfrequented track used chiefly by equestrians, had indeed overtaken the Duchess's carriage. Turning abruptly to the left, it entered the open gateway belonging to one of the corner houses of the Rond-Point de l'Etoile.

“Decidedly, the young lady is very fond of posing,” said the General, with a shrug, and, settling himself in his corner, he turned his thoughts elsewhere.

Having deposited her two friends at their own door, the Duchess ordered the coachman to take her home, and at the foot of the steps she said to her brother:

“Will you dine with us to-night?”

“No, not to-night,” he replied, “but we shall meet at the theatre.”

And, crossing the court, he entered his little bachelor apartment, which he had occupied from time to time since the days when he was only a sub-lieutenant.

CHAPTER X

GENERAL DE PREROLLES



The sub-lieutenant had kept his word, and the progress of his career deserves detailed mention.

He was a lieutenant at the taking of Puebla, where he was first to mount in the assault of the Convent of Guadalupe. Captain of the Third Zouaves after the siege of Oajaca, he had exercised, during the rest of the expedition, command over a mounted company, whose duty was to maintain communications between the various columns, continuing, at the same time, their operations in the Michoacan.

This confidential mission, requiring as much power to take the initiative as it demanded a cool head, gave the Marquis opportunity to execute, with rapidity and decision, several master-strokes, which, in the following circumstances, won for him the cross of the Legion of Honor.



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The most audacious of the guerrillas who had devastated this fertile country was a chief called Regulas. He pillaged the farms, stopped railway trains, boldly demanding ransom from captives from the municipal governments of large towns. He was continually, active, and always inaccessible.

Warned by his scouts that the followers of this villain menaced the town of Pazcuaro, Captain de Prerolles prepared himself eagerly to meet them. He overtook them in a night march, and fell upon them unexpectedly, just as they were holding up the diligence from Morelia to Guadalajara. His plans had been so well laid that not a man escaped. What was the surprise of the French officer to find, among the travellers, delivered by himself from certain death, Paul Landry, the principal cause of his ruin, who the chances of war now laid under obligations to him!

“This is my revenge,” said the Captain, simply, to Landry, attempting to avoid his thanks, and returning to him intact his luggage, of which the chinacos had not had time to divide the contents.

Reconciled in Algiers with his regiment, Henri de Prerolles did not again quit the province of Constantine except to serve in the army of the Rhine, as chief of battalion in the line, until the promotions which followed the declaration of war in 1870. Officer of the Legion of Honor for his gallantry at Gravelotte and at St. Privat, and assigned for his ability to the employ of the chief of corps, he had just been called upon to assume command of his former battalion of chasseurs, when the disastrous surrender of Metz left him a prisoner of war in the hands of the Germans.

Profoundly affected by this disaster, but learning that the conflict still continued, he refused to avail himself of the offer of comparative freedom in the city, provided he would give his parole not to attempt to escape. He was therefore conducted to a distant fortress near the Russian frontier, and handed over to the captain of the landwehr, who received instructions to keep a strict guard over him.

This officer belonged to the engineering corps, and directed, at the same time, the work of repairs within the citadel, in charge of a civilian contractor.

Taking into consideration the rank of his prisoner, the captain permitted the Marquis to have with him his orderly, an Alsatian, who twice a day brought from the inn his chief's repasts. This functionary had permission also, from ten o'clock in the morning until sunset, to promenade in the court under the eye of the sentinel on guard at the entrance. At five o'clock in the evening, the officer of the landwehr politely shut up his guest in his prison, double-locked the door, put the key in his pocket, and appeared no more until the next morning.

The middle of November had arrived; heavy snows had already fallen, and the prisoner amused himself by constructing fortifications of snow—a work which his amiable jailer

followed with a professional interest, giving him advice regarding modifications proper to introduce in the defense of certain places, himself putting a finger in the pie in support of his demonstration.



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This sort of amusement was followed so industriously that in a few days a kind of rampart was erected in front of the casemate of the fortress, behind which, by stooping a little, a man of ordinary height could easily creep along unseen by the sentinel.

While pursuing his work of modelling in snow, the Marquis de Prerolles had taken care to observe the goings and comings of the civilian contractor, who, wearing a tall hat and attired in a black redingote, departed regularly every day at half-past four, carrying a large portfolio under his arm. To procure such a costume and similar accessories for himself was easy, since the Marquis's orderly spoke the language of the country; and to introduce them into the prison, hidden in a basket of provisions, was not difficult to accomplish.

To execute all this required only four trips to and fro. At the end of forty-eight hours, the necessary aids to escape were in the proper place, hidden under the snow behind the bastion. More than this, the clever Alsatian had slipped a topographical map of the surrounding country between two of the plates in the basket. According to the scale, the frontier was distant only about five leagues, across open country, sparsely settled with occasional farms which would serve as resting-places.

By that time, the plan of escape was drawn up. Upon the day fixed for his flight, the Marquis assumed his disguise, rolled up his own uniform to look like a man asleep in his bed, lying after the fashion of a sleeping soldier; and pleading a slight illness as an excuse for not dining that evening, and, not without emotion, curled himself up behind the snowy intrenchment which his jailer himself had helped to fashion. That worthy man, only too glad to be able to rejoin his 'liebe frau' a little earlier than usual, peeped through the half-open door of the prisoner's room and threw a glance at the little cot-bed.

"Good-night, Commander!" said the honest fellow, in a gentle voice.

Then he double-locked the door, according to custom, and disappeared whistling a national air. A quarter of an hour later the contractor left the place, and as soon as the functionary who had seen him depart was relieved by another, the prisoner left his hiding-place, crossed the drawbridge in his turn, simulating the gait of his twin, and, without any hindrance, rejoined his orderly at the place agreed upon. The trick was played!

A matter of twenty kilometres was a mere trifle for infantry troopers. They walked as lightly as gymnasts, under a clear sky, through the fields, guided by the lights in the farmhouses, and at nine o'clock, having passed the frontier, they stumbled upon a post of Cossacks ambuscaded behind a hedge!

Unfortunately, at that time the Franco-Russian alliance was still in embryo, and an agreement between the two neighboring States interdicted all passage to Frenchmen

escaping from the hands of their conquerors. The two deserters were therefore conducted to the major of the nearest garrison, who alone had the right to question them.

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As soon as they were in his presence, Henri could not restrain a start of surprise, for he recognized Constantin Lenaieff, one of his adversaries on the fatal night of the Freres-Provencaux.

“Who are you?” demanded the Major, brusquely.

“A dealer in Belgian cattle, purveyor to the German intendant,” hazarded the prisoner, who had his reply all prepared.

“You—nonsense! You are a French officer; that is plain enough to be seen, in spite of your disguise.”

The Major advanced a step in order to examine the prisoner more closely.

“Good heavens!” he muttered, “I can not be mistaken—”

He made a sign to his soldiers to retire, then, turning to Henri, he said:

“You are the Marquis de Prerolles!” and he extended his hand cordially to the former companion of his pleasures.

In a few words Henri explained to him the situation.

“My fate is in your hands,” he concluded. “Decide it!”

“You are too good a player at this game not to win it,” Lenaieff replied, “and I am not a Paul Landry, to dispute it with you. Here is a letter of safe-conduct made out in due form; write upon it any name you choose. As for myself, I regard you absolutely as a Belgian citizen, and I shall make no report of this occurrence. Only, let me warn you, as a matter of prudence, you would do well not to linger in this territory, and if you need money—”

“I thank you!” replied the nobleman, quickly, declining with his customary proud courtesy. “But I never shall forget the service you have rendered me!”

A few moments later, the two travellers drove away in a carriage toward the nearest railway, in order to reenter France by way of Vienna and Turin.

They passed the Austrian and Italian frontiers without difficulty; but at the station at Modena a too-zealous detective of the French police, struck with the Alsatian accent of the orderly, immediately decided that they were two Prussian spies, and refused to allow them to proceed, since they could show him no passports.

“Passports!” cried Henri de Prerolles, accompanying his exclamation with the most Parisian oath that ever had reverberated from the Rue Laffitte to the Madeleine.



“Here is my passport!” he added, drawing from his pocket his officer’s cross, which he had taken good care not to allow to become a souvenir in the hands of his jailer. “And if that does not satisfy you, give me a pen.”

Suiting the action to the word, he seized a pen and wrote out the following telegram:

“Deputy of war, Tours:

“Escaped from prisons of the enemy, I demand admittance to France, and official duties suitable to my rank, that I may cooperate in the national defence.

“De Prerolles, Commandant.”

He handed the paper to the police agent, saying: “Do me the favor to forward this despatch with the utmost expedition.”



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As soon as the agent had glanced at the message, he swept a profound salute. "Pass on, Commandant," said he, in a tone of great respect.

Promoted to a higher rank, and appointed commander of a regiment of foot, the Lieutenant-Colonel de Prerolles rejoined the army of Chanzy, which, having known him a long time, assigned to him the duties of a brigadier-general, and instructed him to cover his retreat from the Loire on the Sarthe.

In the ensuing series of daily combats, the auxiliary General performed all that his chief expected of him, from Orleans to the battle of Maus, where, in the thick of the fight, a shell struck him in the breast. It is necessary to say that on the evening before he had noticed that the little medallion which had been given to him by Fanny Dorville, worn from its chain by friction, had disappeared from his neck. Scoffing comrades smiled at the coincidence; the more credulous looked grave.

The wound was serious, for, transported to the Chateau de Montgeron, a few leagues distant, the Marquis was compelled to remain there six months before he was in fit condition to rejoin his command. Toward the end of his convalescence, in June, 1871, the brother and sister resolved to make a pious pilgrimage to the cradle of their ancestors.

Exactly nine years had elapsed since the castle and lands had been sold at auction and fallen into the possession of a company of speculators, who had divided it and resold it to various purchasers. Only the farm of Valpendant, with a house of ancient and vast construction, built in the time of Philippe-Auguste, remained to an old tenant, with his dependencies and his primitive methods of agriculture.

Leaving the train at the Beaumont tunnel, the two travellers made their way along a road which crosses the high plateau that separates the forest of Carnelle from the forest of the Ile-d'Adam, whence one can discern the steeple of Prerolles rising above the banks of the Oise.

From this culminating point they beheld the chateau transformed into a factory, the park cut up into countryseats, the fields turned into market-gardens! With profound sadness the brother and the sister met each other's glance, and their eyes filled with tears, as if they stood before a tomb on All Souls' Day.

"No expiation is possible," said Henri to Jeanne, pressing her hand convulsively. "I must go—I must move on forever and ever, like the Wandering Jew."

Thanks to the influence of the Duke of Montgeron, whose faithful constituents had sent him to the National Assembly, his brother-in-law had been transferred to a regiment of zouaves, of which he became colonel in 1875, whereupon he decided to remain in Africa during the rest of his life.



But Tunis and Tonquin opened new horizons to him. Landing as a brigadier-general at Haiphong, he was about to assume, at Bac-Ninh, his third star, when the Minister of War, examining the brilliant record of this officer who, since 1862, never had ceased his service to his country, called him to take command of one of the infantry divisions of the army of Paris, a place which he had occupied only a few months before the events related in the preceding chapter.



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CHAPTER XI

EUGENIE GONTIER

Few salons in Paris have so imposing an air as the foyer of the dramatic artists of the Comedie Francaise, a rectangular room of fine proportions, whose walls are adorned with portraits of great actors, representing the principal illustrations of the plays that have been the glory of the house Mademoiselle Duclos, by Largilliere; Fleury, by Gerard; Moliere crowned, by Mignard; Baron, by De Troy, and many others.

At the left of the entrance, separated by a large, high mirror which faced the fireplace, two other canvases, signed by Geffroy, represent the foyer itself, in costumes of the classic repertoire, the greater part of the eminent modern 'societaires', colleagues and contemporaries of the great painter.

Between the windows, two pedestals, surmounted by busts of Mademoiselle Clairon and Mademoiselle Dangeville, stood, one on each side of the great regulator—made by Robin, clockmaker to the king—which dominated the bust of Moliere—after Houdon—seeming to keep guard over all this gathering of artistic glory.

Opposite this group, hanging above a large table of finely chiselled iron, were two precious autographs under glass: a brevet of pension, dated 1682, signed Louis and countersigned Colbert; an act of notary, dated 1670, bearing the signature of Moliere, the master of the house.

Disposed about the room were sofas, armchairs, and tete-a-tete seats in oak, covered with stamped green velvet.

Here, at the first representations of new plays, or at important revivals of old ones, flocked literary notables and the regular frequenters of the theatre, eager to compliment the performers; here, those favored strangers who have the proper introduction, and who wish to see the place at close range, are graciously conducted by the administrator-general or by the officer for the week.

Here it was that the Marquis de Prerolles appeared in the evening after his experience at the skating-pond. He had dressed, and had dined in great haste at a restaurant near the theatre.

The posters announced a revival of 'Adrienne Lecouvreur', with Mademoiselle Gontier in the principal role, in which she was to appear for the first time.

Eugenie Gontier was, it was said, the natural daughter of a great foreign lord, who had bequeathed to her a certain amount of money. Therefore, she had chosen the theatrical life less from necessity than from inclination.



She was distinguished in presence, a great favorite with the public, and had a wide circle of friends, among whom a rich banker, the Baron de Samoreau, greatly devoted to her, had made for her investments sufficiently profitable to enable her to occupy a mansion of her own, and to open a salon which became a favorite rendezvous with many persons distinguished in artistic, financial, and even political circles. Talent being the guaranty of good companionship, this salon became much frequented, and General de Prerolles had become one of its most assiduous visitors.



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The first act had begun. Although the charming artist was not to appear until the second act, she had already descended from her dressing-room, and, finding herself alone in the greenroom, was putting a final touch to her coiffure before the mirror when the General entered.

He kissed her hand gallantly, and both seated themselves in a retired corner between the fireplace and the window.

“I thank you for coming so early,” said Eugenie. “I wished very much to see you to-night, in order to draw from your eyes a little of your courage before I must face the footlights in a role so difficult and so superb.”

“The fire of the footlights is not that of the enemy—above all, for you, who are so sure of winning the battle.”

“Alas! does one ever know? Although at the last rehearsal Monsieur Legouve assured me that all was perfect, look up there at that portrait of Rachel, and judge for yourself whether I have not reason to tremble at my audacity in attempting this role after such a predecessor.”

“But you yourself caused this play to be revived,” said Henri.

“I did it because of you,” Eugenie replied.

“Of me?”

“Yes. Am I not your Adrienne, and is not Maurice de Saxe as intrepid as you, and as prodigal as you have been? Was he not dispossessed of his duchy of Courlande, as you were of your—”

A gesture from Henri prevented her from finishing the sentence.

“Pardon me!” said she. “I had forgotten how painful to you is any reference to that matter. We will speak only of your present renown, and of the current of mutual sympathy that attracts each of us toward the other. For myself, that attraction began on the fourteenth of last July. You had just arrived at Paris, and a morning journal, in mentioning the troops, and the names of the generals who appeared at the review, related, apropos of your military exploits, many exciting details of your escape during the war. Do you recall the applause that greeted you when you marched past the tribunes? I saw you then for the first time, but I should have known you among a thousand! The next day—”

“The next day,” Henri interrupted, “it was my turn to applaud you. I had been deprived a long time of the pleasures of the theatre, of which I am very fond, and I began by going



to the Comedie Francaise, where you played, that night, the role of Helene in 'Mademoiselle de la Seigliere.' Do you remember?"

"Do I remember! I recognized you instantly, sitting in the third row in the orchestra."

"I had never seen you until then," Henri continued, "but that sympathetic current was soon established, from the moment you appeared until the end of the second piece. As it is my opinion that any officer is sufficiently a gentleman to have the right to love a girl of noble birth, I fell readily under the spell in which she whom you represented echoed my own sentiments. Bernard Stamply also had just returned from captivity, and the more enamored of you he became the more I pleased myself with fancying my own personality an incarnation of his, with less presumption than would be necessary for me to imagine myself the hero of which you spoke a moment ago. After the play, a friend brought me here, presented me to you—"



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“And the sympathetic current did the rest!” added Eugenie Gontier, looking at him tenderly. “Since then you have consecrated to me a part of whatever time is at your disposal, and I assure you that I never have been so happy, nor have felt so flattered, in my life.”

“Second act!” came the voice of the call-boy from the corridor.

“Will you return here after the fourth act?” said the actress, rising. “I shall wish to know how you find me in the great scene, and whether there is another princess de Bouillon among the audience—beware of her!”

“You know very well that there is not.”

“Not yet, perhaps, but military men are so inconstant! By and by, Maurice!” she murmured, with a smile.

“By and by, Adrienne!” Henri replied, kissing her hand.

He accompanied her to the steps that led to the stage, and, lounging along the passage that ends at the head of the grand stairway, he entered the theatre and hastened to his usual seat in the third row of the orchestra.

CHAPTER XII

RIVAL BEAUTIES

It was Tuesday, the subscription night; the auditorium was as much the more brilliant as the play was more interesting than on other nights. In one of the proscenium boxes sat the Duchesse de Montgeron with the Comtesse de Lisieux; in another the Vicomtesse de Nointel and Madame Thomery. In the first box on the left Madame Desvanneaux was to be seen, with her husband and her son, the youthful and recently rejected pretender to the hand of Mademoiselle de Vermont.

Among the subscription seats in the orchestra sat the Baron de Samoreau, the notary Durand, treasurer of the Industrial Orphan Asylum; the aide-de-camp of General Lenaieff, beside his friend the Marquis de Prerolles. One large box, the first proscenium loge on the right, was still unoccupied when the curtain rose on the second act.

The liaison of Eugenie Gontier with the Marquis de Prerolles was not a mystery; from the moment of her entrance upon the scene, it was evident that she “played to him,” to use a phrase in theatrical parlance. Thus, after the recital of the combat undertaken in behalf of Adrienne by her defender—a recital which she concluded in paraphrasing these two lines:



'Paraissez, Navarrois, Maures et Castilians,
Et tout ce que l'Espagne a produit de vaillants,'

many opera-glasses were directed toward the spectator to whom the actress appeared to address herself, when suddenly a new object of interest changed the circuit of observation. The door of the large, right-hand box opened, and Zibeline appeared, accompanied by the Chevalier de Sainte-Foy, an elderly gallant, carefully dressed and wearing many decorations, and whose respectable tale of years could give no occasion for malicious comment on his appearance in the role of 'cavalier servente'. Having assisted his companion to remove her mantle, he profited by the instant of time she took to settle her slightly ruffled plumage before the mirror, to lay upon the railing of the box her bouquet and her lorgnette. Then he took up a position behind the chair she would occupy, ready to assist her when she might deign to sit down. His whole manner suggested a chamberlain of the ancient court in the service of a princess.



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Mademoiselle de Vermont disliked bright colors, and wore on this occasion a robe of black velvet, of which the 'decolletée' bodice set off the whiteness of her shoulders and her neck, the latter ornamented with a simple band of cherry-colored velvet, without jewels, as was suitable for a young girl. Long suede gloves, buttoned to the elbow, outlined her well-modelled arms, of which the upper part emerged, without sleeves, from lace ruffles gathered in the form of epaulets.

The men admired her; the women sought some point to criticise, and had the eyes of Madame Desvanneaux been able to throw deadly projectiles, her powerful lorgnette would have become an instrument of death for the object of her resentment.

"This morning," said the irreconcilable matron, "she showed us her ankles; this evening she allows us to see the remainder."

"I should have been very well pleased, however—" murmured young Desvanneaux, with regret.

"If you had married her, Victor," said his mother, "I should have taken full charge of her wardrobe, and should have made some decided changes, I assure you."

Perfectly indifferent to the general curiosity, Zibeline in her turn calmly reviewed the audience. After exploring the boxes with her opera-glass, she lowered it to examine the orchestra stalls, and, perceiving the Marquis, she fixed her gaze upon him. Undoubtedly she knew the reason for the particular attention which he paid to the stage, because, until the end of the act, her glance was divided alternately between the General and the actress.

As the curtain fell on this act the spectators turned their backs to the footlights, and Lenaieff, indicating Zibeline to his friend, said in his slightly Slavonic accent:

"Who is that pretty woman, my dear Henri?"

"One of Jules Verne's personages, a product of the land of furs."

"Do you know her?"

"Not at all. I have a prejudice against girls that are too rich. Why do you ask?"

"Because it seems to me that she looks at you very attentively."

"Indeed! I had not noticed it."

In saying this, the General—exaggerated! He had been perfectly well aware of the gaze of Mademoiselle de Vermont, but whether he still cherished a slight resentment



against the lady, or whether her appearance really displeased him, he cut the conversation short and went to pay his respects to the occupants of several boxes.

Evidently Zibeline knew few persons in society, for no visitor appeared in her box. However, after the next act she made a sign to M. Durand. That gentleman rejoined the Baron de Samoreau in the corridor and took him to meet Zibeline, and a sort of council appeared to be going on in the rear of her box.

“What the deuce can she be talking about to them?” said Desvanneaux to his wife.

“A new offer of marriage, probably. They say she declares she will marry no one of lower rank than a prince, in order to complete our chagrin! Perhaps they have succeeded in finding one for her!”



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The instructions that Mademoiselle de Vermont gave to the two men must have been easy to execute, for neither the notary nor the banker seemed to raise the least objection. The conversation was finished, and both gentlemen saluted her, preparing to take leave, when she said to M. Durand:

“You understand that the meeting is for tomorrow?”

“At five o’clock,” he replied.

“Very well. I will stop for you at your door at a quarter of an hour before that time.”

The fourth act had begun, that scene in which Adrienne accomplishes her generous sacrifice in furnishing herself the ransom which must deliver her unfaithful lover. The rapt attention that Zibeline paid to this scene, and the slight movements of her head, showed her approval of this disinterested act. Very touching in her invocation to her “old Corneille,” Mademoiselle Gontier was superb at the moment when the comedienne, knowing at last who is her rival, quotes from Racine that passage in ‘Phedre’ which she throws, so to speak, in the face of the patrician woman:

. . . . Je sais ses perfidies, OEnone! et ne suis point de ces femmes hardies Qui, goutant dans la crime une honteuse paix, Ont su se faire un front qui ne rougit jamais.

From the place she was to obliged to take in the arrangement of the scene, the apostrophe and the gestures of the actress appeared to be unconsciously directed toward Mademoiselle de Vermont, who could not restrain a startled movement.

“Look! One would think that Zibeline took that allusion for herself,” said Madame Desvanneaux, whom nothing escaped.

On reentering the greenroom, after two well-deserved recalls, Eugenie Gontier was soon surrounded by a throng of admirers who had come to congratulate her upon her success.

“Were you pleased, Henri?” she said in a low tone to the General.

“Enthusiastically!” he replied.

“Ah, then I can die happy!” she said, laughingly.

As she traversed the ranks of her admirers to go to change her costume for the last act, she found herself face to face with Zibeline, who, having quickly recovered from her emotion, was advancing on the arm of the Chevalier de Sainte-Foy.

“My dear child,” said the old nobleman to the actress, “I bring to you Mademoiselle de Vermont, who wishes to say to you herself—”



“That Mademoiselle must be very tired of listening to our praises,” interrupted Zibeline. “But if the tribute of a foreigner can prove to her that her prestige is universal, I beg that she will accept these flowers which I dared not throw to her from my box.”

“Really, Mademoiselle, you embarrass me!” Eugenie replied, somewhat surprised.

“Oh, you need not fear to take them—they are not poisoned!” added Zibeline, smiling.

And, after a gracious inclination of her head, to which the actress responded with a deep courtesy, Zibeline took again the arm of her escort in order to seek her carriage, without waiting for the end of the play.



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Three-quarters of an hour later, as, the audience was leaving the theatre, M. Desvanneaux recounted to whoever chose to listen that Mademoiselle de Vermont had passed the whole of the last 'entr'acte' in the greenroom corridor, in a friendly chat with Eugenie Gontier.

ETEXT editor's bookmarks:

Life goes on, and that is less gay than the stories
Men admired her; the women sought some point to criticise

ZIBELINE

By PHILIPPE DE MASSA

BOOK 2.

CHAPTER XIII

THE INDUSTRIAL ORPHAN ASYLUM

When the prefectoral axe of the Baron Haussmann hewed its way through the Faubourg St. Germain in order to create the boulevard to which this aristocratic centre has given its flame, the appropriation of private property for public purposes caused to disappear numerous ancient dwellings bearing armorial devices, torn down in the interest of the public good, to the equalizing level of a line of tramways. In the midst of this sacrilegious upheaval, the Hotel de Montgeron, one of the largest in the Rue St. Dominique, had the good fortune to be hardly touched by the surveyor's line; in exchange for a few yards sliced obliquely from the garden, it received a generous addition of air and light on that side of the mansion which formerly had been shut in.

The Duke lived there in considerable state. His electors, faithful in all things, had made of their deputy a senator who sat in the Luxembourg, in virtue of the Republican Constitution, as he would have sat as a peer of France had the legitimate monarchy followed its course. He was a great lord in the true meaning of the word: gracious to the humble, affable among his equals, inclined, among the throng of new families, to take the part of the disinherited against that of the usurpers.

In Mademoiselle de Prerolles he had found a companion animated with the same sentiments, and the charitable organization, meeting again at the Duchess's residence, on the day following the revival of 'Adrienne Lecouvreur', to appoint officers for the Industrial Orphan Asylum, could not have chosen a president more worthy or more devoted.



Besides such austere patronesses as Madame Desvanneaux and her daughter, the organization included several persons belonging to the world of fashion, such as Madame de Lisieux and Madame de Nointel, whose influence was the more effective because their circle of acquaintance was more extensive. The gay world often fraternizes willingly with those who are interested in philanthropic works.

The founders of the Industrial Orphan Asylum intended that the institution should harbor, bring up, and instruct as great a number as possible of the children of infirm or deceased laborers.



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The secretary, M. Andre Desvanneaux, churchwarden of *Ste.-Clotilde*, as was his father before him, and in addition a Roman count, had just finished his address, concluding by making the following double statement: First, the necessity for combining all available-funds for the purchase of the land required, and for the building of the asylum itself; second, to determine whether the institution could be maintained by the annual resources of the organization.

"I should like to observe," said the Duchesse de Montgeron, "that the first of these two questions is the only order of the day. Not counting the purchase of the land, the architect's plan calls for an estimate of five hundred thousand francs in round numbers."

"And we have on hand—" said the Comtesse de Lisieux.

"One hundred and sixty-odd thousand francs from the first subscriptions," said M. Desvanneaux. "It has been decided that the work shall not begin until we have disposed of half of the sum total. Therefore, the difference we have to make up at present is about one hundred and forty thousand francs. In order to realize this sum, the committee of action proposes to organize at the Palais de l'Industrie a grand kermess, with the assistance of the principal artists from the theatres of Paris, including that of Mademoiselle Gontier, of the Comedie Francaise," added the secretary, with a sly smile on observing the expression of General de Prerolles.

"Good!" Henri promptly rejoined. "That will permit Monsieur Desvanneaux to combine very agreeably the discharge of his official duties with the making of pleasant acquaintances!"

"The object of my action in this matter is above all suspicion," remarked the churchwarden, with great dignity, while his wife darted toward him a furious glance.

"You? Come, come!" continued the General, who took a mischievous delight in making trouble for the worthy Desvanneaux. "Every one knows quite well that you have by no means renounced Satan, his poms—"

"And his good works!" added Madame de Nointel, with a burst of laughter somewhat out of place in this formal gathering for the discussion of charitable works.

"We are getting outside of the question," said the Duchess, striking her bell. "Moreover, is not the assistance of these ladies necessary?"

"Indispensable," the secretary replied. "Their assistance will greatly increase the receipts."

"What sum shall we decide upon as the price of admission?" asked Madame de Lisieux.



“Twenty francs,” said Desvanneaux. “We have a thousand tickets printed already, and, if the ladies present wish to solicit subscriptions, each has before her the wherewithal to inscribe appropriate notes of appeal.”

“To be drawn upon at sight,” said the Comtesse de Lisieux, taking a pen. “A tax on vanity, I should call it.”

She wrote rapidly, and then read aloud:



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"My dear Baron:

"Your proverbial generosity justifies my new appeal. You will accept, I am sure, the ten tickets which I enclose, when you know that your confreres, the Messieurs Axenstein, have taken double that number."

"And here," said the Vicomtesse de Nointel, "is a tax on gallantry." And she read aloud:

"My dear prince:

"You have done me the honor to write to me that you love me. I suppose I ought to show your note to my husband, who is an expert swordsman; but I prefer to return to you your autograph letter for the price of these fifteen tickets. Go—and sin again, should your heart prompt you!"

"But that is a species of blackmail, Madame!" cried Madame Desvanneaux.

"The end justifies the means," replied the Vicomtesse gayly. "Besides, I am accountable only to the Duc de Montgeron. What is his opinion?"

"I call it a very clever stroke," said the Duke.

"You hear, Madame! Only, of course, not every lady has a collection of similar little notes!" said the Vicomtesse de Nointel.

The entrance of M. Durand, treasurer of the society, interrupted the progress of this correspondence.

"Do not trouble yourselves so much, Mesdames," said the notary. "The practical solution of the matter I am about to lay before you, if Madame the president will permit me to speak."

"I should think so!" said the Duchess. "Speak, by all means!"

"A charitable person has offered to assume all the expenses of the affair," said the notary, "on condition that carte blanche is granted to her in the matter of the site. In case her offer is accepted, she will make over to the society, within three months, the title to the real estate, in regular order."

"Do you guarantee the solvency of this person?" demanded M. Desvanneaux, who saw the project of the kermess falling to the ground.

"It is one of my rich clients; but I have orders not to reveal her name unless her offer is accepted."



The unanimity with which all hands were raised did not even give time to put the question.

“Her name?” demanded the Duchess.

“Here it is,” replied the notary, handing her a visiting card.

“Valentine de Vermont,” she read aloud.

“Zibeline?” cried Madame de Nointel. “Bravo! I offer her the assurance of my esteem!”

“And I also,” added Madame de Lisieux.

“I can not offer mine,” said Madame Desvanneaux, dryly. “A young woman who is received nowhere!”

“So generous an act should open all doors to her, beginning with mine,” said the Duchesse de Montgeron. “I beg that you will tell her so from me, Monsieur Durand.”

“At once, Madame. She is waiting below in her carriage.”

“Why did you not say so before? I must beg her myself to join us here,” said the master of the house, leaving the room in haste.



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“See how any one can purchase admission to our world in these days!” whispered Madame Desvanneaux in her daughter’s ear.

“Heavens! yes, dear mother! The only question is whether one is able to pay the price.”

We must render justice to the two titled patronesses by saying that the immediate admission of Mademoiselle de Vermont to their circle seemed to them the least they could do, and that they greeted her appearance, as she entered on the arm of the Duke, with a sympathetic murmur which put the final stroke to the exasperation of the two malicious dames.

“You are very welcome here, Mademoiselle,” said the Duchess, advancing to greet her guest. “I am delighted to express to you, in behalf of all these ladies, the profound gratitude with which your generous aid inspires them!”

“It is more than I deserve, Madame la Duchesse!” said Valentine. “The important work in which they have taken the initiative is so interesting that each of us should contribute to it according to his means. I am alone in Paris, without relatives or friends, and these ladies have furnished me the means to cure my idleness; so it is I, rather, who am indebted to them.”

Whether this speech were studied or not, it was pronounced to be in very good taste, and the stranger’s conquest of the assemblage was more and more assured.

“Since you wish to join us,” resumed the Duchess, “allow me to present to you these gentlemen: Monsieur Desvanneaux, our zealous general secretary—”

“I have already had the pleasure of seeing Monsieur at my house,” said Valentine, “also Madame Desvanneaux; and although I was unable to accede to their wishes, I retain, nevertheless, the pleasantest recollections of their visit.”

“Good hit!” whispered Madame de Nointel to her neighbor.

“The Marquis de Prerolles, my brother,” the Duchess continued.

“The smiles of Fortune must be sweet, Mademoiselle,” said the General, bowing low.

“Not so sweet as those of Glory, General,” Zibeline replied, with a pretty air of deference.

“She possesses a decidedly ready wit,” said Madame de Lisieux in a confidential aside.

“Now, ladies,” added the president, “I believe that the best thing we can do is to leave everything in the hands of Mademoiselle and our treasurer. The examination of the



annual resources will be the object of the next meeting. For to-day, the meeting is adjourned.”

Then, as Mademoiselle de Vermont was about to mingle with the other ladies, the Duchess detained her an instant, inquiring:

“Have you any engagement for this evening, Mademoiselle?”

“None, Madame.”

“Will you do us the honor to join us in my box at the opera?”

“But—I have no one to accompany me,” said Zibeline. “I dismissed my cousin De Sainte-Foy, thinking that I should have no further need of his escort to-day.”



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“That does not matter at all,” the Duchess replied. “We will stop for you on our way.”

“I should not like to trouble you so much, Madame. If you will allow me, I will stop at your door at whatever hour will be agreeable to you, and my carriage shall follow yours.”

“Very well. At nine o’clock, if you please. They sing *Le Prophete* tonight, and we shall arrive just in time for the ballet.”

“The ‘Skaters’ Ballet,’” said the General.

This remark recalled to Mademoiselle her triumph of the evening before. “Do you bear a grudge against me?” she said, with a smile.

“Less and less of one,” the General replied.

“Then, let us make a compact of peace,” said Zibeline, holding out her hand in the English fashion.

With these words she left the room on the arm of the Duke, who claimed the honor of escorting her to her carriage.

“Shall you go to the opera also?” asked the Duchess of her brother.

“Yes, but later. I shall dine in town.”

“Then-au-revoir—this evening!”

“This evening!”

CHAPTER XIV

A WOMAN’S INSTINCT

The General had been more favorably impressed with Zibeline’s appearance than he cared to show. The generous action of this beautiful girl, her frankness, her ease of manner, her cleverness in repartee, were likely to attract the attention of a man of his character. He reproached himself already for having allowed himself to be influenced by the rancorous hostility of the Desvanneaux, and, as always happens with just natures, the sudden change of his mind was the more favorable as his first opinion had been unjust.

Such was the theme of his reflections on the route from the Hotel de Montgeron to that of Eugenic Gontie’s, with whom he was engaged to dine with some of her friends, invited to celebrate her success of the evening before.



On entering her dining-room Eugenie took the arm of Lenaieff, placed Henri de Prerolles on her left and Samoreau opposite her—in his character of senior member, so that no one could mistake his transitory function with that of an accredited master of the house.

The four other guests were distinguished writers or artists, including the painter Edmond Delorme, and, like him, all were intimate friends of the mistress of the house.

Naturally the conversation turned upon the representation of Adrienne, and on the applause of the fashionable audience, usually rather undemonstrative.

“Never have I received so many flowers as were given to me last night,” said Eugenic, displaying an enormous beribboned basket which ornamented the table. “But that which particularly flattered me,” she added, “was the spontaneous tribute from that pretty foreigner who sought me in the greenroom expressly to offer me her bouquet.”

“The young lady in the proscenium box, I will wager,” said Lenaieff.



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"Precisely. I know that they call her Zibeline, but I did not catch her real name."

"It is Mademoiselle de Vermont," said Edmond Delorme. "She is, in my opinion, the most dashing of all the Amazons in the Bois de Boulogne. The Chevalier de Sainte-Foy brought her to visit my studio last autumn, and I am making a life-size portrait of her on her famous horse, Seaman, the winner of the great steeplechase at Liverpool, in 1882."

"What were you pencilling on the back of your menu while you were talking?" asked the actress, curiously.

"The profile of General de Prerolles," the painter replied. "I think that his mare Aida would make a capital companion picture for Seaman, and that he himself would be an appropriate figure to adorn a canvas hung on the line opposite her at the next Salon!"

"Pardon me, dear master!" interrupted the General. "Spare me, I pray, the honor of figuring in this equestrian contradance. I have not the means to bequeath to posterity that your fair model possesses—"

"Is she, then, as rich as they say?" inquired one of the guests.

"I can answer for that," said the Baron de Samoreau. "She has a letter of credit upon me from my correspondent in New York. Last night, during an entr'acte, she gave me an order to hold a million francs at her disposal before the end of the week."

"I know the reason why," added Henri.

"But," Lenaieff exclaimed, "you told me that you did not know her!"

"I have made her acquaintance since then."

"Ah! Where?" Eugenie inquired, with interest.

"At my sister's house, during the meeting of a charitable society."

"Had it anything to do with the society for which Monsieur Desvanneaux asked me to appear in a kermess?"

"Well, yes. In fact, he has gone so far as to announce that he is assured of your cooperation."

"I could not refuse him," said Eugenie. "Under the mantle of charity, the holy man paid court to me!"

"I knew well enough that he had not yet laid down his arms forever," said the General.



“Oh, he is not the only one. His son-in-law also honored me with an attack.”

“What, Monsieur de Thomery? Well, that is a good joke!”

“But what is funnier yet,” continued the actress, “is the fact that the first-named gentleman was on his knees, just about to make me a declaration, apparently, when the second was announced! Immediately the father-in-law jumped to his feet, entreating me not to allow them to meet. I was compelled to open for him the door leading to the servants’ stairway—”

“And what did you do with the other man?” asked Lenaieff, laughing loudly.

“I rid myself of him in the same way. At a sign from me, my maid announced the name of the father-in-law, and the alarmed son-in-law escaped by the same road! Oh, but I know them! They will come back!”



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“Under some other pretext, however,” said the General. “Because Mademoiselle de Vermont’s million francs have destroyed their amorous designs.”

“So now we see Zibeline fairly launched,” remarked the banker. “Since the Duchesse de Montgeron has taken her up, all the naughty tales that have been fabricated about her will go to pieces like a house of cards.”

“That is very probable,” the General concluded, “for she has made a complete conquest of my sister.”

At these words a slight cloud passed over the actress’s face. The imagination of a jealous mistress sees rivals everywhere; especially that of an actress.

After dinner, while her other guests went into the smoking-room, Eugenic made a sign to her lover to remain with her, and seated herself beside him.

“I wish to ask you a question, Henri,” said she.

“What is it?”

“Do you still love me?”

“What reason have you to doubt it?”

“None that warrants me in reproaching you for anything. But so many things separate us! Your career, to which you owe everything! Your social standing, so different from mine! Oh, I know that you are sincere, and that if you ever have a scruple regarding our liaison, you will not be able to hide it from me. It is this possibility of which I think.”

“You are quite wrong, I assure you. Did I hide myself last night in order to prove openly my admiration for you? Did I appear to disclaim the allusions which you emphasized in seeming to address me in the course of your role?”

“No, that is true. Shall I make a confession? When I am on the stage, I fear nothing, because there the points of comparison are all in my favor, since you can say to yourself: ‘This woman on whom all eyes are fixed, whose voice penetrates to the depths of the soul—this woman, beautiful, applauded, courted, belongs to me—wholly to me,’ and your masculine vanity is pleasantly flattered. But later, Henri! When the rouge is effaced from my lips, when the powder is removed from my cheeks—perhaps revealing some premature line caused by study and late hours—if, after that, you return to your own circle, and there encounter some fresh young girl, graceful and blooming, the object, in her turn, of the fickle admiration of the multitude, forgetful already of her who just now charmed them—tell me, Henri! do you not, as do the others, covet that beautiful exotic flower, and must not the poor comedienne weep for her lost prestige?”



“It is Mademoiselle de Vermont, then, who inspires you with this apprehension,” said the General, smiling.

“Well, yes, it is she!”

“What childishness! Lenaieff will tell you that I have never even looked at her.”

“Last night, perhaps—but to-day?”

“We exchanged no more than a dozen words.”

“But the more I think of her visit to the greenroom, the more inexplicable it appears to me.”



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“You need not be surprised at that: she does nothing that any one else does.”

“These things are not done to displease you.”

“I may agree as to that; but what conclusion do you draw?”

“That she is trying to turn your head.”

“My head! You jest! I might be her father.”

“That is not always a reason—”

Nevertheless, Henri’s exclamation had been so frank that Eugenie felt somewhat reassured.

“Are you going so soon?” she said, seeing him take his hat.

“I promised my sister to join her at the opera. Besides, this is your reception night, and I leave you to your duties as hostess. To-morrow, at the usual hour-and we will talk of something else, shall we not?”

“Ah, dearest, that is all I ask!” said Eugenie.

He attempted to kiss her hand, but she held up her lips. He pressed his own upon them in a long kiss, and left her.

CHAPTER XV

DEFIANCE OF MRS. GRUNDY

For more than fifty years the first proscenium box on the ground floor, to the left, at the Opera, had belonged exclusively to ten members of the jockey Club, in the name of the oldest member of which the box is taken. When a place becomes vacant through any cause, the nine remaining subscribers vote on the admission of a new candidate for the vacant chair; it is a sort of academy within the national Academy of Music.

When this plan was originated, that particular corner was called “the infernal box,” but the name has fallen into desuetude since the dedication of the fine monument of M. Gamier. Nevertheless, as it is counted a high privilege to be numbered among these select subscribers, changes are rare among them; besides, the members are not, as a rule, men in their first youth. They have seen, within those walls, the blooming and the renewal of several generations of pretty women; and the number of singers and dancers to whom they have paid court in the coulisses is still greater.



From their post of observation nothing that occurs either before or behind the curtain escapes their analysis—an analysis undoubtedly benevolent on the part of men who have seen much of life, and who accord willingly, to their younger fellow-members, a little of that indulgence of which they stand in need themselves.

An event so unexpected as the enthronement of Zibeline in one of the two large boxes between the columns, in company with the Duchesse de Montgeron, Madame de Lisieux, and Madame de Nointel, did not escape their observation and comment.

“The Duchess is never thoughtless in her choice of associates,” said one of the ten. “There must be some very powerful motive to induce her to shield with her patronage a foreigner who sets so completely at defiance anything that people may say about her.”

“Nonsense! What is it, after all, that they say about this young woman?” demanded the senior member of the party. “That she rides alone on horseback. If she were to ride with a groom, some one would be sure to say that he was her lover. They say that she drives out without any female chaperon beside her in the carriage. Well, if she had one, they would probably find some other malicious thing to say. Paris has become like a little country town in its gossip.”



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“And all this,” added a third member, “because she is as lovely as a dream, and because she drives the handsomest turnout in the Bois. If she were ugly, and contented herself with a hired carriage, she would be absolved without confession!”

“Where the deuce does Christian charity come in, in all this gossip?” said Henri de Prerolles to himself, who had just entered the box and overheard the last remarks. “Will you grant me your hospitality until the beginning of the next act, gentlemen?” he said aloud. “My sister’s box is full of guests and transient visitors; she can not admit even me!”

The General was a great favorite with the members of the club. One of them rose to offer him his place.

“I shall stay only a moment, to escape a cloud of questioners in the foyer. Every one that stops me asks—”

“About the new recruit in the Duchess’s box, eh?” said a member. “We, too, wish to inquire about her; we are all leagued together.”

“Thank you, no,” said the General.

“But if it is a secret—”

“There is no secret about it,” the General replied; and in a few words he explained the enigma.

“Why, then,” exclaimed the senior member, “she is indeed the fowl that lays the golden eggs! What a lucky bird will be the one that mates with her!”

The rising curtain sent the spectators back to their places. The augurs of the Duchess’s box reinstalled themselves before it where they could examine at their ease through their lorgnettes the fair stranger of whom so much had been said; and, mounting to the next floor, the General was at last able to find room among his sister’s guests.

“You can see for yourself that our young friend is altogether charming,” whispered Madame de Nointel, behind the shelter of her fan, and indicating Zibeline.

“If you pronounce her so, Madame, she can receive no higher praise,” said Henri.

“Say at once that you think me exasperating,” laughed the lady.

“Was it not you that first called her Zibeline?” Henri inquired.



“Yes, but she calls herself Valentine—which rhymes, after all. Not richly enough for her, I know, but her means allow her to do without the supporting consonant. See how beautiful she is to-night!”

In fact, twenty-four hours had sufficed to change the lonely stranger of the day before into the heroine of this evening, and the satisfaction that shone in her face tempered the somewhat haughty and disdainful expression that had hitherto characterized her.

“You have not yet said ‘good-evening’ to Mademoiselle de Vermont, Henri,” said the Duchess to her brother, and he changed his place in order to act upon her hint.

“Ah, is it you, General?” said Zibeline, affecting not to have seen him until that moment. “It seems that music interests you less than comedy.”

“What has made you form that opinion, Mademoiselle?”



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“The fact that you arrive much later at the opera than at the Comedie Francaise.”

“Have you, then, kept watch upon my movements?”

“Only a passing observation of signs—quite allowable in warfare!”

“But I thought we had made a compact of peace.”

“True enough, we did make it, but suppose it were only an armistice?”

“You are ready, then, to resume hostilities?” said Henri.

“Now that I have Madame la Duchesse, your sister, for an ally, I fear no enemies.”

“Not even if I should call for aid upon the camp of Desvanneaux?”

“Alceste leagued with Tartufe? That idea never occurred to Moliere,” said Zibeline, mischievously.

“Take care!” said the Duchess, interrupting this skirmishing, “you will fall over into the orchestra! It is growing late, and if Mademoiselle de Vermont does not wish to remain to see the final conflagration, we might go now, before the crowd begins to leave.”

“I await your orders, Madame la Duchesse,” said Zibeline, rising.

The other ladies followed her example, receiving their cloaks from the hands of their cavaliers, and the occupants of the box made their exit in the following order: Zibeline, on the arm of the Duke; the Comtesse de Lisieux, leaning upon M. de Nointel; Madame de Nointel with the General; the Duchess bringing up the procession with M. de Lisieux.

As soon as they reached the outer lobby their footmen ran to find their carriages, and that of the Duc de Montgeron advanced first.

“I beg, Madame, that you will not trouble yourself to wait here until my carriage comes,” said Mademoiselle de Vermont to the Duchess, who hesitated to leave her guest alone.

“Since you wish it, I will leave you, then,” said the Duchess, “and we thank you for giving us your society this evening. My brother will accompany you to your carriage.”

When Zibeline’s vehicle drove up to the entrance in its turn, the General conducted his charge to the door of a marvellously equipped brougham, to which was harnessed a carriage-horse of powerful frame, well suited to the kind of vehicle he drew.



A thaw had begun, not yet transforming the gutters into yellow torrents rushing toward the openings of the sewer, but covering the streets with thick, black mud, over which the wheels rolled noiselessly.

“Your carriage is late, is it not?” said Zibeline, after the General had handed her into the brougham.

“My carriage?” said the General. “Behold it!”

He pointed to a passing fiacre, at the same time hailing the driver.

“Don’t call him. I will take you home myself,” said Zibeline, as if such a suggestion were the most natural thing in the world.

“You know that in France it is not the custom,” said the General.

“What! Do you bother yourself with such things at your age?”

“If my age seems to you a sufficient guaranty, that is different. I accept your invitation.”



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“To the Hotel de Montgeron,” said Zibeline to her footman.

“I never shall forget your sister’s kindness to me,” she continued, as the carriage rolled away. “She fulfils my idea of the great lady better than any other woman I have seen.”

“You may be proud of her friendship,” said Henri. “When once she likes a person, it is forever. I am like her in that respect. Only I am rather slow in forming friendships.”

“And so am I.”

“That is obvious, else you would have been married ere this.”

“No doubt—to some one like young Desvanneaux, perhaps. You are very flattering! If you think that I would sacrifice my independence for a man like that—”

“But surely you do not intend to remain unmarried.”

“Perhaps I shall—if I do not meet my ideal.”

“All women say that, but they usually change their minds in the end.”

“Mine is one and indivisible. If I do not give all I give nothing.”

“And shall you wait patiently until your ideal presents himself?”

“On the contrary, I am always looking for him.”

“Did you come to Europe for that purpose?”

“For that and for nothing else.”

“And suppose, should you find your ideal, that he himself raises obstacles?”

“I shall try to smooth them away.”

“Do you believe, then, that the power of money is irresistible?”

“Far from it! A great fortune is only a trust which Providence has placed in our hands, in order that we may repair, in its name, the injustices of fate. But I have another string to my bow.”

“What is it?”

“The force of my will.”



“You have plenty of that! But suppose, by some impossible chance, your ideal resists you even then?”

“Then I know what will remain for me to do.”

“You will resort to the pistol?”

“Not for him, but for myself,” she replied, in a tone so resolute as to exclude any suggestion of bravado.

Zibeline’s horse, which was a rapid trotter, now stopped before the Hotel de Montgeron, arriving just in advance of the Duchess’s carriage, for which the Swiss was watching at the threshold of the open Porte cochere. He drew himself up; the brougham entered the gate at a swift pace, described a circle, and halted under the marquee at the main entrance. The General sprang lightly to the ground.

“I thank you, Mademoiselle,” bowing, hat in hand, to his charming conductor.

“Call me Valentine, please,” she responded, with her usual ease of manner.

“Even in the character of a stage father, that would be rather too familiar,” said the Marquis.

“Not so much so as to call me Zibeline,” said Mademoiselle de Vermont, laughing.

“Ha! ha! You know your sobriquet, then?”

“I have known it a long time! Good-night, General! We shall meet again.”

Then, addressing her footman, she said in English: “Home!”



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CHAPTER XVI

FRATERNAL ADVICE

Like all residences where the owners receive much company, the Hotel de Montgeron had a double porte-cochere. Just as the Swiss opened the outer gate to allow the departure of Mademoiselle de Vermont, the two carriages crossed each other on the threshold. In fact, Henri had had hardly time to cross the courtyard to mount to his own apartments before his brother-in-law and his sister stopped him at the foot of the steps. He rejoined them to say good-night.

"Won't you come and take a cup of tea with us in the little salon?" they asked.

"Willingly," was his response. He followed them, and all three seated themselves beside a table which was already laid, and upon which the boiling water sang in the kettle.

"Leave us," said the Duchess to the butler. "I will serve tea myself. Did Mademoiselle de Vermont bring you home?" she asked, when the servant had retired.

"Well," said Henri, "in proposing to do so she mentioned my discreet age, which appeared to her to make the thing all right! If I had declined her invitation, I should have seemed to pose as a compromising person! That is the reason why I accepted."

"You did quite right. What do you really think of her?"

"She is very different from what I had fancied her: I find her frank, intellectual, full of originality. I have only one fault to mention: she is too rich."

"Well, surely, you do not expect her to ruin herself to please you."

"I should think not! Besides, what would be the object?"

"To permit you to fall in love with her."

"Oh, that is what you are thinking of, is it?"

"Certainly, for, if need be, perhaps you would make a sacrifice to your feelings."

"In what way?"

"In the toleration of a few remaining millions which she might retain, so that when you marry her neither of you will be reduced to absolute beggary!"

"Marry her!—I?" cried the General, astonished.



“What is there to prevent your doing so?”

“The past, my dear sister. To speculate upon my title and my rank in order to make a wealthy marriage? To quit my nomad’s tent for a fixed residence other than that where the Prerolles have succeeded one another from generation to generation? Never! Of all our ancient prejudices, that is the only one I cherish. Besides, I am free at present to serve my country under any form of government which it may please her to adopt. But, with his hereditary estates lost, through his own fault, shall he who has nothing left to him but his name form a mere branch of another family? He has no right to do so.”

This declaration was categorical. Madame de Montgeron bent her head; her jesting vein was quenched in a moment.

After a moment of silence the Duke spoke.

“There are scruples that one does not discuss,” he said. “But, on the other hand, if I do not deceive myself, there are others which can be adjusted to suit circumstances.”



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“What circumstances?” said the General.

“The subject is rather delicate—especially to mention before you, my dear Jeanne.”

“I was just about to propose that I should retire,” said the Duchess. “Good-night, Henri!” And she bent to kiss him.

“You are not vexed?” said her brother, embracing her tenderly.

“What an idea! Good-night!”

“Am I always to be considered as occupying the stool of repentance?” Henri inquired, as soon as his sister had left the room.

“Yes, but you will not be offended if I interrogate you a little, after the manner of a judge?” said the Duke.

“Quite the contrary. Go on; I will listen.”

“Had you not just now expressed yourself very distinctly in disfavor of any project of marriage because of perfectly unimpeachable principles, I should not permit myself to make any allusion to your private life. Every man is his own master in his choice of liaisons, and on that head is answerable only to his own conscience. In these days, moreover, art is on a level with birth, and talent with military glory. You see that I am quite modern in my ideas! However—”

“Ah, there is a reserve?”

“Without liability. Mademoiselle Gontier is surrounded by great luxury. She maintains an expensive house and keeps an open table. Her annual salary and her income can not possibly cover these expenses. Whence does she obtain further resources?”

“From the investments made for her by the Baron de Samoreau.”

“Without her having to pay a commission of any kind? A most remarkable case of disinterestedness!”

“I never have sought to examine the matter particularly,” said Henri.

“And is that the way you keep yourself informed? A future general-in-chief!”

“I was not aware that I am in an enemy’s country.”

“No, but you are in a conquered country, which is still more dangerous. Oh, no one will attack you face to face at the point of the sword. But behind your back, in the shadow,



you have already massed against you various rejected swains, the Desvanneaux of the coulisses, jealous of a preference which wounds their own vanity, and the more ready to throw discredit—were they able—upon a man of your valor, because they are better armed against him with the logic of facts.”

“What logic, in heaven’s name?”

“That which emanates from the following dilemma: Either Danae is obliged to hide from Jupiter—or, rather, from Maecenas—her intimacy with you—and you are only a lover who simply loves her—or else Maecenas is an epicurean who has no objection to share his fortune philosophically; so that ostensibly you sit at the feast without paying the cost—which is worse yet.”

“Does any one dare to say that of me?” cried the General, springing from his chair.

“They are beginning to say it,” the Duke replied, his eyes fixed on his brother-in-law, who paced to and fro, gnawing his moustache. “I ask your pardon for throwing such a bucket of ice-water on you, but with men of your constitution—”



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"Pleurisy is not mortal," Henri interrupted briefly. "I know. Don't worry about me."

"I knew you would understand," said the Duke, going toward the door of his own apartments. "That is the reason why I have not spared you a thorough ducking!"

"I thank you," said the General, as he was about to leave the room. "I will talk to you about this tomorrow. The night brings counsel."

Wrapped in thought, he made his way to the little suite of apartments between the ground floor and the first story which he occupied, and which had a separate door opening on the Rue de Bellechase.

At the foot of the stairs, in a coach-house which had been transformed into a chamber, slept the orderlies beneath the apartment of their chief. This apartment, composed of four rooms, was of the utmost simplicity, harmonizing with the poverty of its occupant, who made it a point of honor not to attempt to disguise his situation.

The ante-chamber formed a military bureau for the General and his chief orderly.

The salon, hung with draperies to simulate a tent, had no other decoration than some trophies of Arabian arms, souvenirs of raids upon rebellious tribes.

More primitive still was the bedroom, furnished with a simple canteen bed, as if it were put up in a temporary camp, soon to be abandoned.

The only room which suggested nothing of the anchorite was the dressing-room, furnished with all the comforts and conveniences necessary to an elegant and fastidious man of the world.

But his real luxury, which, by habit and by reason of his rank, the General had always maintained, was found among his horses, as he devoted to them all the available funds that could be spared from his salary. Hence the four box-stalls placed at his disposal in the stables of his brother-in-law were occupied by four animals of remarkably pure blood, whose pedigrees were inscribed in the French stud-book. Neither years, nor the hard service which their master had seen, had deteriorated any of his ability as a dashing horseman. His sober and active life having even enabled him to preserve a comparatively slender figure, he would have joined victoriously in the races, except that his height made his weight too heavy for that amusement.

Entering his own domain, still overwhelmed, with the shock of the revelations and the gossip of which he never had dreamed, he felt himself wounded to the quick in all those sentiments upon which his 'amour propre' had been most sensitive.

The more he pondered proudly over his pecuniary misfortunes, the more grave the situation appeared to him, and the more imperious the necessity of a rupture.



When it had been a question of dismissing Fanny Dorville, an actress of humble standing, his parting gift, a diamond worth twenty-five thousand francs, had seemed to him a sufficient indemnity to cancel all accounts.

But now, in the presence of an artiste of merit, who had given herself without calculation and who loved him for himself alone, how, without wounding her heart and her dignity, could he break violently a chain so light yesterday, so heavy to-day?



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To indulge in tergiversation, to invent some subterfuge to cover his retreat—he did not feel himself capable of such a course; moreover, his manoeuvre would be quickly suspected by a clever woman whom nothing escaped.

To ask to be sent back to Africa, just at the time when his intelligent and practical instruction in the latest grand manoeuvres had drawn all eyes upon him, would compromise, by an untimely retirement, the advantages of this new office, the object of his ambition.

For the first time this nobleman, always prompt and radical in his decisions, found himself hesitating; and, such is the power of human egotism even in generous natures, he felt almost incensed against Eugenie, the involuntary cause of his hesitation.

After weighing everything carefully in his mind, he finally said to himself that an open confession, sincere and unrestricted, would be the best solution of the difficulty; and just as the first light of day came to dissipate the shadow that overcast his mind, when his orderly entered to open the blinds in his chamber, he formed a fixed resolution as to his course.

CHAPTER XVII

THE LADY BOUNTIFUL

Valentine de Vermont was not yet twenty-two years old.

Her birth had cost the life of her mother, and, brought up by an active and enterprising man, her education had been directed by plain common-sense, rather masculine, perhaps, but without injury to her personal attractions, nor to those of her delicate and lofty spirit.

Her father, who was endowed with a veritable genius for commercial action, had monopolized more than the fur-trade of Alaska and of Hudson's Bay. From year to year he had extended the field of his operations: in Central America, dealing in grains and salt meats; in Europe in wines and brandy; commodities always bought at the right time, in enormous quantities, and, without pausing in transshipment from one country to another, carried in vessels belonging to him and sailing under the English flag.

Without giving her any unnecessary instruction as to the management of his affairs, he wished his daughter to possess sufficient knowledge of them to handle herself the wealth that she would receive as a dowry and at his death; and he decided that she should not contract a marriage except under the law of the separation of goods, according to the custom generally adopted in the United States.



An attack of paralysis having condemned him to his armchair, he consecrated the remainder of his days to settling all his enterprises, and when he died, about two years before the arrival of Valentine in Paris, that young lady found herself in the possession of more than one hundred and twenty million francs, nearly all invested in English, American, and French State bonds.

At the expiration of her period of mourning, the wealthy heiress could then live in London, New York, or Paris, at her pleasure; but the French blood that ran in her veins prevented her from hesitating a moment, and she chose the last named of the three cities for her abode.

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Being passionately fond of saddle and driving-horses, she did not stop in England without taking the necessary time to acquire everything of the best for the fitting-up of a stable, and after a time she established herself temporarily in a sumptuous apartment in the Place de l'Etoile, furnished with a taste worthy of the most thorough Parisian.

On the evening after her appearance at the Opera, just as she left her breakfast-table, M. Durand presented himself at her dwelling with the architect's plan for the building of the orphan asylum, and declared himself ready to take her orders regarding the plan, as well as on the subject of the gift of money to the Society.

"I have resolved," said Zibeline, "to transform into an asylum, following a certain plan, the model farm belonging to the estate that I have recently purchased through you. If I required carte blanche in choosing the site, it was because I desire that Monsieur Desvanneaux shall have nothing to do with the matter until the day when I shall put the committee in possession of the building and its premises, which I have engaged to furnish, free of all expense to the Society. I shall employ my own architect to execute the work, and I shall ask you to indemnify, for me, the architect who has drawn up this first plan, which will remain as the minimum expense incurred on my part. But I wish to be the only person to superintend the arrangements, and to be free to introduce, without control, such improvements as I may judge suitable. Should the committee demand a guaranty, I have on deposit with Monsieur de Samoreau a million francs which I intend to use in carrying out these operations. Half of that sum may be consigned to the hands of some one they may wish to choose; the other half will serve to pay the laborers in proportion to their work. In order to insure even greater regularity, have the kindness to draw up, to cover the interval that will elapse before I make my final definite donation, a provisional document, setting forth the engagement that I have undertaken to carry out."

"Here it is," said the notary; "I have already prepared it."

Having examined the document carefully, to assure herself that all statements contained therein were according to her intentions, Zibeline took her pen and wrote at the foot of the page: "Read and approved," and signed the paper.

"Mademoiselle appears to be well accustomed to business habits," observed M. Durand, with a smile.

"That is because I have been trained to them since childhood," she replied. "My plan is to place this document myself in the hands of Madame la Duchesse de Montgeron."

"You can do so this very afternoon, if you wish. Thursday is her reception day," said the notary, rising with a bow, preparatory to taking his leave.

"I shall take good care not to fail to call," earnestly replied the fair Lady Bountiful.



She telephoned immediately to her head-groom, ordering him to bring around her brougham at three o'clock.



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CHAPTER XVIII

A MODERN TARTUFE

At the same hour that the elegant carriage of Zibeline was conducting her to the Hotel de Montgeron, M. Desvanneaux descended from a modest fiacre at the gate of the hotel occupied by Eugenie Gontier.

The first impulse of the actress—who was engaged in studying a new role in her library—was not to receive her importunate visitor; but a sudden idea changed her determination, and she gave the order to admit him.

“This is the first time that I have had the high favor of being admitted to this sanctuary,” said the churchwarden, kissing with ardor the hand that the actress extended to him.

“Don’t let us have so great a display of pious manifestations,” she said, withdrawing her hand from this act of humility, which was rather too prolonged. “Sit down and be sensible,” she added.

“Can one be sensible when he finds himself at your feet, dear Mademoiselle? At the feet of the idol who is so appropriately enthroned among so many artistic objects!” replied the honey-tongued Prudhomme, adjusting his eyeglasses. “The bust of General de Prerolles, no doubt?” he added, inquiringly, scrutinizing a marble statuette placed on the high mantelpiece.

“You are wrong, Monsieur Desvanneaux; it is that of Moliere!”

“I beg your pardon!—I am standing so far below it! I, too, have on my bureau a bust of our great Poquelin, but Madame Desvanneaux thinks that this author’s style is somewhat too pornographic, and has ordered me to replace his profane image by the more edifying one of our charitable patron, Saint Vincent de Paul.”

“Is it to tell me of your family jars that you honor me with this visit?” said Eugenie.

“No, indeed! It was rather to escape from them, dear Mademoiselle! But alas! my visit has also another object: to release you from the promise you were so kind as to make me regarding the matter of our kermess; a project now unfortunately rendered futile by that Zibeline!”

“Otherwise called ‘Mademoiselle de Vermont.’”

“I prefer to call her Zibeline—that name is better suited to a courtesan.”

“You are very severe toward her!”



“I can not endure hypocrites!” naively replied the worthy man.

“She appeared to me to be very beautiful, however,” continued Eugenie Gontier, in order to keep up the conversation on the woman who she felt instinctively was her rival.

“Beautiful! Not so beautiful as you,” rejoined M. Desvanneaux, gallantly. “She is a very ambitious person, who throws her money at our heads, the better to humiliate us.”

“But, since it is all in the interest of the Orphan Asylum—”

“Say, rather, in her own interest, to put herself on a pedestal because of her generosity! Oh, she has succeeded at the first stroke! Already, at the Hotel de Montgeron they swear by her; and if this sort of thing goes on, I shall very soon be regarded only as a pariah!”



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“Poor Monsieur Desvanneaux!”

“You pity me, dear Mademoiselle? I thank you! The role of consoler is truly worthy of your large heart, and if you do not forbid me to hope—” said this modern Tartufe, approaching Eugenie little by little.

“Take care!” said she; “suppose the General should be hidden under that table, like Orgon!”

“The General!” exclaimed Desvanneaux; “he is too much occupied elsewhere!”

“Occupied with whom?”

“With Zibeline, probably. He never left her side all the evening, last night at the Opera.”

“Pardon me! He was here until after ten o’clock.”

“Yes, but afterward—when the opera was over?”

“Well, what happened when the opera was over?” Eugenie inquired, forcing herself to hide her emotion.

“They went away together! I saw them—I was watching them from behind a column. What a scandal!”

“And your conclusion on all this, Monsieur Desvanneaux?”

“It is that the General is deceiving you, dear Mademoiselle.”

“With that young girl?”

“A bold hussy, I tell you! A Messalina! Ah, I pity you sincerely in my turn! And should a devoted consoler, a discreet avenger, be able to make you forget this outrage to your charms, behold me at your feet, devoting to you my prayers, awaiting only a word from you to become the most fortunate among the elect—”

A loud knock at the outer door spared Mademoiselle Gontier the trouble of repelling her ridiculous adorer, who promptly scrambled to his feet at the sound.

“A visitor!” he murmured, turning pale. “Decidedly, I have no luck—”

“Monsieur le Marquis de Prerolles is in the drawing-room,” a domestic announced.

“Beg him to wait,” said Eugenie, reassured by this visit, which was earlier than the usual hour. “You see that you are badly informed, Monsieur Desvanneaux,” she added.



“For heaven’s sake, spare me this embarrassing meeting!” said the informer, whose complexion had become livid.

“I understand. You fear a challenge?”

“Oh, no, not that! My religious principles would forbid me to fight a duel. But the General would not fail to rally me before my wife regarding my presence here, and Madame Desvanneaux would be pitiless.”

“Own, however, that you richly deserve a lesson, Lovelace that you are! But I will take pity on you,” said Eugenie, opening a door at the end of the room. “The servants’ stairway is at the end of that corridor. You know the way!” she added, laughing.

“I am beginning to know it, dear Mademoiselle!” said the pitiful beguiler, slipping through the doorway on tiptoe.

CHAPTER XIX

BROKEN TIES

After picking up a chair which, in his alarm, the fugitive had overturned in his flight, Mademoiselle Gontier herself opened the door leading to the drawing-room.



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“Come in, Henri!” said she, lifting the portiere.

“Do I disturb you?” the General inquired, entering the library.

“Never! You know that well! But how gravely you asked the question!”

“For the reason that I wish to speak to you about serious matters, my dear Eugenie.”

The image of Zibeline passed before the eyes of the actress. That which Desvanneaux had revealed, in accusing the girl of debauchery, now appeared plausible to her, if considered in another way.

“You are about to marry!” she exclaimed.

They were the same words pronounced by Fanny Dorville in similar circumstances.

“Never! You know that well enough!” he replied, in his turn.

“Speak, then!” said she, sinking upon a chair and motioning him to a seat before her.

He obeyed, and sitting so far forward upon his chair that his knees touched her skirt, he took both her hands in his own, and said gently:

“You know how much I love you, and how much I esteem you. You know, too, the story of my life: my past follies, and also the honorable career I have run in order to atone for them morally, for in a material sense they are irreparable—according to my ideas, at least. This career has been fortunate. I have reached the highest rank that a soldier can attain to-day. But my rapid promotion, however justifiable it may be, has none the less awakened jealousy. The nature of my services being above all possibility of suspicion, calumny has sought another quarter at which to strike, and at this moment it is my delicacy which is impugned.”

“Your delicacy, Henri! What do you mean?” asked Eugenie, in an altered voice.

“Our friendship is well known. You are rich, and I have only my pay: the antithesis is flagrant! The gossips comment upon it, and exploit the fact against me.”

“Against you!” cried Eugenie, indignantly.

“Against me—yes. I have proof of it. A man in private life would be justified in ignoring such gossip, but for a man in my profession ambiguity has no place, nor has compromise. Himself a severe judge of the conduct of others, he must not afford them a single instance whereby they can accuse him of not following his own precepts.”



And, as his companion remained silent and startled before an explanation so unexpected, he added:

“You say nothing, my love. You must divine the depth of my chagrin at the prospect of a necessary separation, and you are sufficiently charitable not to remind me that I ought to have made these tardy reflections before I yielded to a fascination which made me close my eyes to facts.”



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"I reproach you with nothing, Henri," said Eugenie in a trembling voice. "I myself yielded to the same enchantment, and in abandoning myself to it, I did not foresee that some day it might be prejudicial to your honor. A singular moral law is that of the world!" she pursued, growing more excited. "Let General de Prerolles be the lover of Madame de Lisieux or of Madame de Nointel; let him sit every day at their tables—if there be only a husband whose hand he may clasp in greeting, no one will call this hospitable liaison a crime! But let him feel anything more than a passing fancy for Eugenie Gontier, who violates no conjugal vow in loving him, but whose love he is not rich enough to buy—even were that love for sale—oh, then, everyone must point at him the finger of scorn! As for myself, it seems that it was useless for me to resist so many would-be lovers in order to open my door more freely to the man of my choice—an action which no one holds against me, however, because I am only an actress, and the public classes us in a separate category, so that they may more readily offer up to us the incense with which they smother us! Be it so! There are also in my profession disinterested hearts which may serve as examples—and I pretend to the very highest rank as an actress in every role I assume, even in this city. Take back your liberty, Henri!"

"I have most unwillingly offended you," said he, sadly.

"You? Ah, no! I know that you are loyal and sincere, and I could not harbor resentment against you after your avowal. You would have lacked self-confidence had you acted otherwise. But," she continued, "have you indeed told me all?"

"All!" he replied, without hesitation.

"Will you give me your word of honor that no other woman stands between you and me?"

"I swear it to you!"

"I thank you! You are incapable of lying. Whatever happens, you never will have a better friend than I, for your just pride is still more dear to me than my own. If you cease to come to the theatre, and appear no more at my receptions, that will be sufficient to insure the silence of gossip concerning us. Go without remorse, Henri! But come back to see me sometimes—quietly, without the knowledge of the envious—will you not?"

"Do you doubt it?" he responded, folding her tenderly in his arms.

"Yes and no! But if this is our supreme farewell, do not tell me so!"

ETEXT editor's bookmarks:

Ambiguity has no place, nor has compromise
But if this is our supreme farewell, do not tell me so!
Chain so light yesterday, so heavy to-day



Every man is his own master in his choice of liaisons
If I do not give all I give nothing
Indulgence of which they stand in need themselves
Ostensibly you sit at the feast without paying the cost
Paris has become like a little country town in its gossip
The night brings counsel
You are in a conquered country, which is still more dangerous



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ZIBELINE

By PHILIPPE DE MASSA

BOOK 3.

CHAPTER XX

ZIBELINE RECEIVES

The Duchesse de Montgeron had no children, and her most tender affections were concentrated upon her husband and her brother. The scruples which caused the latter to forswear matrimony grieved her deeply, for, knowing the inflexibility of his character, she was sure that no one in the world could make him alter his decision.

Thus, on one side the title of the Duc de Montgeron was destined to pass to a collateral branch of the family; and on the other, the title of Marquis de Prerolles would become extinct with the General.

But, although she now considered it impossible to realize the project which she had momentarily cherished, she continued to show the same kindness to Mademoiselle de Vermont. She would have regarded any other course as unworthy of her, since she had made the first advances; moreover, the young girl's nature was so engaging that no one who approached her could resist her charm.

Very reserved or absolutely frank, according to the degree of confidence with which she was treated, Valentine had sufficient intuition to avoid a lack of tact.

She was, in feminine guise, like 'L'Ingenu' of Voltaire, struck, as was Huron, with all that was illogical in our social code; but she did not make, after his fashion, a too literal application of its rules, and knew where to draw the line, if she found herself on the point of making some hazardous remark, declaring frankly: "I was about to say something foolish!" which lent originality to her playful conversation.

After receiving from Valentine's hands the contract signed in presence of the notary, for the benefit of the Orphan Asylum, the president of the society did not fail to give a dinner in honor of the new patroness.

As she was a foreigner she was placed in the seat of honor at the table, to the great displeasure of Madame Desvanneaux, who was invited to take the second place, in spite of her title of vice-president.



“It is because of her millions that she was placed before me,” she said in an undertone to her husband, as soon as the guests had returned to the drawing-room. And, giving orders that her carriage should be summoned immediately, she left the house without speaking to any one, and with the air of a peeress of England outraged in her rights of precedence!

This was, for the hostile pair, a new cause of grievance against Zibeline. When she, in her turn, gave at her home a similar dinner, a fortnight later, she received from them, in reply to her invitation, which was couched in the most courteous terms, a simple visiting card, with the following refusal: “The Comte and the Comtesse Desvanneaux, not being in the habit of accepting invitations during Lent, feel constrained to decline that of Mademoiselle de Vermont.”



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The dinner was only the more gay and cordial.

Valentine's household was conducted on a footing more elegant than sumptuous.

The livery was simple, but the appearance of her people was irreproachable. The butler and the house servants wore the ordinary dress-coat and trousers; the powdered footmen wore short brown coats, ornamented, after the English fashion, with metal buttons and a false waistcoat; the breeches were of black velveteen, held above the knee by a band of gold braid, with embroidered ends, which fell over black silk stockings. At the end of the ante-chamber where this numerous personnel was grouped, opened a long gallery, ornamented with old tapestries representing mythological subjects in lively and well-preserved coloring. This room, which was intended to serve as a ballroom at need, was next to two large drawing-rooms. The walls of one were covered with a rich material, on which hung costly paintings; the furniture and the ceiling of the other were of oak, finely carved, relieved with touches of gold in light and artistic design.

Everywhere was revealed an evident desire to avoid an effect of heaviness and ostentation, and this was especially noticeable in the dining-room, where the pure tone of the panels and the moulding doubled the intensity of the light thrown upon them. Upon the table the illumination of the apartment was aided by two large candelabra of beautifully chiselled silver, filled with candles, the light of which filtered through a forest of diaphanous little white shades.

The square table was a veritable parterre of flowers, and was laid for twelve guests, three on each side.

The young mistress of the house was seated on one side, between the Duc de Montgeron and the Marquis de Prerolles. Facing her sat the Duchesse de Montgeron, between General Lenaieff and the Chevalier de Sainte-Foy.—Laterally, on one hand appeared Madame de Lisieux, between M. de Nointel and the painter Edmond Delorme; on the other, Madame de Nointel, between M. de Lisieux and the Baron de Samoreau.

Never, during the six weeks that Valentine had had friendly relations with the Duchess, had she appeared so self-possessed, or among surroundings so well fitted to display her attractions of mind and of person. She was a little on the defensive on finding herself in this new and unexpected society, but she felt, this evening, that she was in the midst of a sympathetic and admiring circle, and did the honors of her own house with perfect ease, finding agreeable words and showing a delicate forethought for each guest, and above all displaying toward her protectress a charming deference, by which the Duchess felt herself particularly touched.



“What a pity!” she said to herself, glancing alternately at Zibeline and at her brother, between whom a tone of frank comradeship had been established, free from any coquetry on her side or from gallantry on his.



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The more clearly Henri divined the thoughts of his sister, the more he affected to remain insensible to the natural seductions of his neighbor, to whom Lenaieff, on the contrary, addressed continually, in his soft and caressing voice, compliments upon compliments and madrigals upon madrigals!

“Take care, my dear Constantin!” said Henri to him, bluntly. “You will make Mademoiselle de Vermont quite impossible. If you go on thus, she will take herself seriously as a divinity!”

“Fortunately,” rejoined Zibeline, “you are there, General, to remind me that I am only a mortal, as Philippe’s freedman reminded his master every morning.”

“You can not complain! I serve you as a confederate, to allow you to display your erudition,” retorted the General, continuing his persiflage.

But he, too, was only a man, wavering and changeable, to use Montaigne’s expression, for his eyes, contradicting the brusqueness of his speech, rested long, and not without envy, on this beautiful and tempting fruit which his fate forbade him to gather. The more he admired her freshness, and the more he inhaled her sweetness, the more the image of Eugenie Gontier was gradually effaced from his memory, like one of those tableaux on the stage, which gauze curtains, descending from the flies, seem to absorb without removing, gradually obliterating the pictures as they fall, one after another.

CHAPTER XXI

A DASHING AMAZON

On leaving the table, the fair “Amphitryonne” proposed that the gentlemen should use her private office as a smoking-room, and the ladies followed them thither, pretending that the odor of tobacco would not annoy them in the least, but in reality to inspect this new room.

Edmond Delorme had finished his work that very morning, and the enormous canvas, with its life-size subject, had already been hung, lighted from above and below by electric bulbs, the battery for which was cleverly hidden behind a piece of furniture.

The portrait, bearing a striking resemblance to the original, was indeed that of “the most dashing of all the Amazons on the Bois,” to quote the words of the artist, who was a better painter of portraits than of animals, but who, in this case, could not separate the rider from her steed.

Seaman, a Hungarian bay, by Xenophon and Lena Rivers, was drawn in profile, very erect on his slender, nervous legs. He appeared, on the side nearest the observer, to be pawing the ground impatiently with his hoof, a movement which seemed to be



facilitated by his rider, who, drawn in a three-quarters view and extending her hand, allowed the reins to fall over the shoulders of her pure-blooded mount.

“What do you think of it?” Zibeline inquired of General de Prerolles.

“I think you have the air of the commander of a division of cavalry, awaiting the moment to sound the charge.”



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"I shall guard her well," said Zibeline, "for she would be sure to be put to rout by your bayonets."

"Not by mine!" gallantly exclaimed Lenaieff. "I should immediately lower my arms before her!"

"You!—perhaps! But between General de Prerolles and myself the declaration of war is without quarter. Is it not, General?" said Valentine, laughing.

"It is the only declaration that fate permits me to make to you, Mademoiselle," Henri replied, rather dryly, laying emphasis on the double sense of his words.

This rejoinder, which nothing in the playful attack had justified, irritated the Duchess, but Valentine appeared to pay no attention to it, and at ten o'clock, when a gypsy band began to play in the long gallery, she arose.

"Although we are a very small party," she said, "would you not like to indulge in a waltz, Mesdames? The gentlemen can not complain of being crowded here," she added, with a smile.

M. de Lisieux and M. de Nointel, as well as Edmond Delorme, hastened to throw away their cigarettes, and all made their way to the long gallery. The Baron de Samoreau and the Chevalier de Sainte-Foy remained alone together.

The Duchess took the occasion to speak quietly to her brother.

"I assure you that you are too hard with her," she said. "There is no need to excuse yourself for not marrying. No one dreams of such a thing—she no more than any one else. But she seems to have a sentiment of friendship toward you, and I am sure that your harshness wounds her."

A more experienced woman than Madame de Montgeron, who had known only a peaceful and legitimate love, would have quickly divined that beneath her brother's brusque manner lurked a budding but hopeless passion, whence sprang his intermittent revolt against the object that had inspired it.

This revolt was not only against Zibeline's fortune; it included her all-pervading charm, which penetrated his soul. He was vexed at his sister for having brought them together; he was angry with himself that he had allowed his mind to be turned so quickly from his former prejudices; and, however indifferent he forced himself to appear, he was irritated against Lenaieff because of the attentions which that gentleman showered upon Zibeline, upon whom he revenged himself by assuming the aggressive attitude for which the Duchess had reproached him.



In a still worse humor after the sisterly remonstrance to which he had just been compelled to listen, he seated himself near the entrance of the gallery, where the gypsy band was playing one of their alluring waltzes, of a cadence so different from the regular and monotonous measure of French dance music.

The three couples who were to compose this impromptu ball, yielded quickly to the spell of this irresistible accompaniment.

“Suppose Monsieur Desvanneaux should hear that we danced on the eve of Palm Sunday?” laughingly pro-tested Madame de Lisieux.



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“He would report it at Rome,” said Madame de Nointel.

And, without further regard to the compromising of their souls, each of the two young women took for a partner the husband of the other.

Mademoiselle de Vermont had granted the eager request of Lenaieff that she would waltz with him, an occupation in which the Russian officer acquitted himself with the same respectful correctness that had formerly obtained for him the high favor of some grand duchess at the balls in the palace of Gatchina.

He was older and stouter than his brother-in-arms, Henri de Prerolles, and a wound he had received at Plevna slightly impeded his movements, so that he was unable to display the same activity in the dance as the other waltzers, and contented himself with moving a ‘trois temps’, in an evolution less in harmony with the brilliancy of the music.

Henri, on the contrary, who had been a familiar friend of the Austrian ambassador at the time when the Princess de Metternich maintained a sort of open ballroom for her intimates, had learned, in a good school, all the boldness and elegance of the Viennese style of dancing.

But he sat immovable, as did also Edmond Delorme, because of the lack of partners; and, not wishing to take the second place after Lenaieff, his rival, he would not for the world abandon his role of spectator, unless some one forced him to it.

“Suppose we have a cotillon figure, in order to change partners?” said Valentine suddenly, during a pause, after she had thanked her partner.

And, to set the example, she took, from a basket of flowers, a rosebud, which she offered to Henri.

“Will you take a turn with me?” she said, with the air of the mistress of the house, who shows equal courtesy to all her guests.

“A deux temps?” he asked, fastening the rosebud in his buttonhole.

“Yes, I prefer that,” she replied.

He passed his arm around her waist, and they swept out upon the polished floor, he erect and gallant, she light and supple as a gazelle, her chin almost resting upon her left hand, which lay upon her partner’s shoulder, her other hand clasped in his.

At times her long train swirled in a misty spiral around her, when they whirled about in some corner; then it spread out behind her like a great fan when they swept in a wide curve from one end of the gallery to the other.



During the feverish flight which drew these two together, their breasts touched, the bosom of the enchantress leaned against the broad chest of the vigorous soldier, her soft hair caressed his cheek, he inhaled a subtle Perfume, and a sudden intoxication overflowed his heart, which he had tried to make as stern and immobile as his face.

“How well you waltz!” murmured Zibeline, in his ear.

“I am taking my revenge for my defeat on the ice,” he replied, clasping her a little closer, in order to facilitate their movements.



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“The prisoners you take must find it very difficult to escape from your hands,” she said, with a touch of malice.

“Does that mean that already you wish to reclaim your liberty?”

“Not yet—unless you are fatigued.”

“Fatigued! I should like to go thus to the end of the world!”

“And I, too,” said Zibeline, simply.

By common consent the other waltzers had stopped, as much for the purpose of observing these two as for giving them more space, while the wearied musicians scraped away as if it were a contest who should move the faster, themselves or the audacious couple.

“What a pity!” again said the Duchess to her husband, whose sole response was a shrug of his shoulders as he glanced at his brother-in-law.

At the end of his strength, and with a streaming brow, the gypsy leader lowered his bow, and the music ceased.

Henri de Prerolles, resuming his sang-froid, drew the hand of Mademoiselle de Vermont through his arm, and escorted her to her place among the other ladies.

“Bravo, General!” said Madame de Lisieux. “You have won your decoration, I see,” she added, indicating the rosebud which adorned his buttonhole.

“What shall we call this new order, ladies?” asked Madame de Nointel of the circle.

“The order of the Zibeline,” Valentine replied, with a frank burst of laughter.

“What?—do you know—” stammered the author of the nickname, blushing up to her ears.

“Do not disturb yourself, Madame! The zibeline is a little animal which is becoming more and more rare. They never have been found at all in my country, which I regret,” said Mademoiselle de Vermont graciously.

The hour was late, and the Duchess arose to depart. The Chevalier de Sainte-Foy, exercising his function as a sort of chamberlain, went to summon the domestics. Meanwhile Valentine spoke confidentially to Henri.

“General,” said she, “I wish to ask a favor of you.”



“I am at your orders, Mademoiselle.”

“I am delighted with the success of this little dinner,” Valentine continued, “and I wish to give another after Easter. My great desire is to have Mademoiselle Gontier—with whom I should like to become better acquainted—recite poetry to us after dinner. Would you have the kindness to tell her of my desire?”

“I!” exclaimed the General, amazed at such a request.

“Yes, certainly. If you ask her, she will come all the more willingly.”

“You forget that I am not in the diplomatic service, Mademoiselle.”

“My request annoys you? Well, we will say no more about it,” said Zibeline. “I will charge Monsieur de Samoreau with the negotiations.”

They rejoined the Duchess, Zibeline accompanying her to the vestibule, always evincing toward her the same pretty air of deference.

The drive home was silent. The Duke and the Duchess had agreed not to pronounce the name of Mademoiselle de Vermont before Henri, who racked his brain without being able to guess what strange motive prompted the young girl to wish to enter into closer relations with the actress.



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A letter from Eugenie was awaiting him. He read:

“Two weeks have elapsed since you have been to see me. I do not ask whether you love me still, but I do ask you, in case you love another, to tell me so frankly.

“Ariadne.”

“So I am summoned to the confessional, and am expected to accuse myself of that which I dare not avow even to my own heart! Never!” said Henri, crushing the note in his hand. “Besides, unless I deceive myself, Ariadne has not been slow in seeking a consoling divinity! Samoreau is at hand, it appears. He played the part of Plutus before; now he will assume that of Bacchus,” thought the recreant lover, in order to smother his feeling of remorse.

CHAPTER XXII

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

The life of General de Prerolles was uniformly regulated. He arose at dawn, and worked until the arrival of his courier; then he mounted his horse, attired in morning military costume.

After his ride, he visited the quartermaster-general of his division, received the report of his chief of staff, and gave necessary orders. It was at this place, and never at the General's own dwelling, that the captains or subaltern officers presented themselves when they had occasion to speak to him.

At midday he returned to breakfast at the Hotel de Montgeron where, morning and evening, his plate was laid; and soon after this meal he retired to his own quarters to work with his orderly, whose duty it was to report to him regarding the numerous guns and pieces of heavy ordnance which make the object of much going and coming in military life.

After signing the usual number of documents, the General would mount another of his horses, and at this hour would appear in civilian attire for an afternoon canter. After this second ride he would pass an hour at his club, but without ever touching a card, no matter what game was in progress.

He dined at different places, but oftenest with his sister, where by this time a studied silence was preserved on the subject of Zibeline. This, however, did not prevent him from thinking of her more and more.



Mademoiselle de Vermont had not been seen again in the Bois de Boulogne since the night of her dinner, although Henri had sought in vain to meet her in the mornings in the bridle-path, and afternoons in the Avenue des Acacias.

He decided that probably she did not wish to ride during Holy Week; but when several days had passed after Easter, and still she was not seen amusing herself in her usual fashion, he said to himself that perhaps it would be the proper thing to make what is called "a dinner-call."

There are some women whose fascination is so overwhelming as to cause the sanest of lovers to commit themselves, whence comes the slightly vulgar expression, "He has lost his bearings." Henri began to feel that he was in this state when he presented himself at Zibeline's home. A domestic informed him that Mademoiselle had been absent a week, but was expected home that evening. He left his card, regretting that he had not waited twenty-four hours more.



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It was now the middle of April, the time when the military governor of Paris is accustomed to pass in review the troops stationed on the territory under his command, and this review was to take place the next morning.

The order for the mobilizing of his own division having been received and transmitted, Henri's evening was his own, and he resolved to pass it with Lenaieff, feeling certain that his colleague at least would speak to him of Zibeline.

The aide-de-camp general lived at the Hotel Continental, much frequented by Russians of distinction. Henri found his friend just dressing for dinner, and well disposed to accept his proposition.

As they descended the stairs, they passed an imposing elderly man, with white moustache and imperial, still very erect in his long redingote with military buttons—a perfect type of the German officer who gets himself up to look like the late Emperor William I. This officer and the French general stopped on the stairs, each eyeing the other without deciding whether he ought to salute or not, as often happens with people who think they recognize some one, but without being able to recall where or in what circumstances they have met before.

It was Henri whose memory was first revived.

“Captain, you are my prisoner!” he said, gayly, seizing the stranger by the collar.

“What! The Commandant de Prerolles!” cried the elderly man, in a reproachful tone, from which fifteen years had not removed the bitterness.

“I know who he is!” said Lenaieff. “Monsieur is your former jailer of the frontier fortress!”

The officer of the landwehr attempted to withdraw from the hand that held him.

“Oh, I don't intend to let you escape! You are coming to dine with us, and we will sign a treaty of peace over the dessert,” said Henri, clasping the officer's hand affectionately.

His tone was so cordial that the stranger allowed himself to be persuaded. A quarter of an hour later all three were seated at a table in the Cafe Anglais.

“I present to you General Lenaieff,” said Henri to his guest. “You should be more incensed against him than against me, for, if he had done his duty, you would probably have had me imprisoned again.”

“Not imprisoned—shot!” the Captain replied, with conviction.



“In that case I regret my complicity still less,” said Lenaieff, “for otherwise I should have lost an excellent friend, and, had Prerolles been shot, he never could have made me acquainted with the delicious Mademoiselle de Vermont!”

“Ah! So that is what you are thinking of?” Henri said to himself.

“I do not know the young lady of whom you speak,” the German interrupted; “but I know that, for having allowed the Commandant to escape, I was condemned to take his place in the prison, and was shut up there for six months, in solitary confinement, without even seeing my wife!”



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“Poor Captain! How is the lady?” Henry inquired.

“Very well, I thank you.”

“Will you permit us to drink her health?”

“Certainly, Monsieur.”

“Hock! hoch!” said Henri, lifting his glass.

“Hock! hoch!” responded the ex-jailer, drinking with his former prisoner.

This delicate toast began to appease the bitterness of the good man; while the memories of his escape, offering a diversion to Henri’s mind, put him in sympathetic humor with the stranger.

“Ah! There are mountains that we never climb but once,” he said. “We three, meeting in Paris, can prove the truth of that proverb.”

“Not only in Paris,” said Lenaieff. “If you were in Saint Petersburg, Henri, you might, any evening, see your old flame, Fanny Dorville.”

“Does she keep a table d’hote?”

“No, indeed, my boy. She plays duenna at the Theatre Michel, as that fat Heloise used to do at the Palais-Royal. She must have died long ago, that funny old girl!”

“Not at all. She is still living, and is a pensioner of the Association of Dramatic Artists! But, pardon me, our conversation can hardly be amusing to our guest.”

“No one can keep a Frenchman and a Russian from talking about women! The habit is stronger than themselves!” said the old officer, with a hearty laugh.

“Well, and you, Captain,” said Lenaieff: “Have you not also trodden the primrose path in your time?”

“Gentlemen, I never have loved any other woman than my own wife,” replied the honest German, laying his large hand upon his heart, as if he were taking an oath. “That astonishes you Parisians, eh?” he added benevolently.

“Quite the contrary! It assures us peace of mind!” said Lenaieff. “To your health, Captain!”

“And yours, Messieurs!”

And their glasses clinked a second time.



“Apropos,” said Lenaieff to Henri, “the military governor has asked me to accompany him to-morrow to the review at Vincennes. I shall then have the pleasure of seeing you at the head of your division.”

“Teufel!” exclaimed the German officer; “it appears that the Commandant de Prerolles has lost no time since we took leave of each other.”

“Thanks to you, Monsieur! Had you not allowed me to withdraw from your society, I should certainly not have reached my present rank! To your health, Captain!”

“To yours, General!”

Succeeding bumpers finally dissipated entirely the resentment of the former jailer, and when they parted probably never to meet again—he and his prisoner had become the best friends in the world.

“Meine besten complimente der Frau Hauptmannin!” said Henri to him, in leaving him on the boulevard.

“Lieber Gott! I shall take good care not to own to her that I dined with you.”

“And why, pray?”

“Because there is one thing for which she never will forgive you.”



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“What is that?”

“The fact that you were the cause of her living alone for six months!”

CHAPTER XXIII

THE MILITARY REVIEW

The different troops, assembled for review, were massed on the parade-ground at Vincennes, facing the tribunes.

In the centre, the artillery brigade, surrounded by two divisions of infantry, was drawn up in two straight columns, connected by regiments; each division of infantry, in double columns, was connected by brigades.

These six columns were separated by spaces varying from twenty to twenty-five metres.

In the background, the cavalry division was lined up in columns; behind that was its artillery, in the same order of formation.

At a given signal, the troops advanced five hundred metres, and, as soon as they halted, drums, clarinets and trumpets beat and sounded from all parts of the field, saluting the arrival of the military governor of Paris.

This functionary, followed by his staff, in the midst of which group glittered the brilliant Russian uniform of the aide-de-camp General Leniaeff, rode slowly past the front and the flanks of the massed body, the troops facing to the left or the right as he passed.

This inspection finished, he took up his stand before the pillars at the entrance, and the march past began by battalions en masse, in the midst of the acclamations of numerous spectators who had come to witness this imposing display, well calculated to stir patriotic pride.

The enthusiasm increased; the Prerolles division marched past after its artillery, and, as always, the martial and distinguished profile of its general produced its usual effect on the public.

He rode Aida, his favorite mare, an Irish sorrel of powerful frame, with solid limbs, whose horizontal crupper and long tail indicated her race; she was one of those animals that are calm and lively at the same time, capable of going anywhere and of passing through all sorts of trials.

After its parade, the infantry, whose part in the affair was finished, retraced their steps and took up a position on the other side of the field of manoeuvres, facing the north, and in front of rising ground, in preparation for the discharge of musketry.

During this time the artillery brigade, re-formed in battle array on the parade-ground, detached six batteries, which advanced at a trot to within one hundred and fifty metres of the tribunes, where they discharged a volley. The long pieces were run rapidly to right and left, unmasking the cavalry, which, after a similar volley from its own batteries, appeared behind them in battle order, and executed a galloping march, its third line held in reserve.

A few moments later all the troops rejoined the infantry on the ground set apart for rest and for the purpose of partaking of a cold repast, consisting of potted meats, with which each man was furnished.



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Nothing more picturesque could be imagined than this temporary camp, with its stacked arms, knapsacks lying on the ground, holes dug in the ground in which to kindle fires, and the clattering of cans. On the other side of the field the artillerymen and cavalymen ate, holding their reins under their arms, while their officers stood around some temporary table, served by canteen men of the united divisions. Tiny columns of blue smoke rose where coffee was making, and everywhere were the swift movement and sprightly good-fellowship in which the soldier feels himself in his natural element.

The curious spectators crowded themselves in front of the banner, while in the centre of the square the military governor of Paris, and the other officers, talked with some privileged persons who had been able to present themselves among them.

Descending from his mount a little apart from the group, and plunged in thought, the former sub-lieutenant of 'chasseurs a pied' gazed at the old fortress, the sight of which recalled so many sad memories.

Vincennes had been his first garrison, and its proximity to Paris had been disastrous for him. There he had entered one morning, stripped of his fortune!

And what a series of disasters had followed! But for his heavy losses upon that fatal night, he would not have been compelled to sell Prerolles, the income of which, during his long absence, would have sufficed to lessen the tax on the land, transmissible, had events turned out otherwise, to some heir to his name. If only fate had not made Paul Landry cross his path!

"Good morning, General!" came the sound of a fresh, gay voice behind, which sent a thrill through him.

He turned and saw Zibeline, who had just stopped a few steps distant from him, sitting in her carriage, to which was harnessed a pretty pair of cobs, prancing and champing their bits.

"Ah, it is you, Mademoiselle!" he said, carrying his hand to the visor of his kepi, fastened under his chin.

"I found your card last night," said Zibeline, "and I have come here this morning to return your call!"

Then, leaning back in her driving-seat in order to reveal Edmond Delorme installed beside her, she added:

"I have brought also my painter-in-ordinary. We have watched the review together, and he is as enthusiastic as I over the picturesque effect of this improvised bivouac. See! He is so much occupied with his sketch that I can not get a word out of him."



It was Aida, whose bridle was held by a dragoon, that served as a model for the artist's pencil.

"Will you permit me?" he said to Henri.

"It appears decidedly, that my mare has caught your eye," replied the General, approaching the carriage and resting his spurred foot on its step.

"She has superb lines," said the painter, without interrupting his drawing.

"Well, I am curious to know whether she could beat Seaman," said Zibeline. "Are you willing to run a race with me, General?"



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“As you please—some morning when you return to the Bois.”

“You noticed my absence, then?”

“I assure you that I did,” Henri replied, earnestly.

Then, fearing that he had said too much, he added:

“I, and many others!”

“Good! You were almost making a pretty speech to me, but, as usual, the disavowal was not slow in coming. Fortunately, here comes your friend Lenaieff, who is hastening to make amends to me.”

“What good fortune to meet you here, Mademoiselle!” cried Constantin, who, having perceived Valentine from a distance, had taken an abrupt leave of his general-in-chief.

“I know that you have called to see me several times,” said she, “but I was in the country.”

“So early in the month of April?”

“Oh! not to live there. Monsieur de Perolles knows that I have promised to build our Orphan Asylum at a certain distance from Paris, and hardly three weeks remain to me before I must hand over the property. If I am not ready on the day appointed, Monsieur Desvanneaux will be sure to seize my furniture, and I could not invite you any more to dinner, Messieurs! A propos, General, Monsieur de Samoreau has failed in his negotiations. Mademoiselle Gontier refuses to come to recite at my next soiree!”

“What necessity is there for you to make her acquaintance?” demanded Henri.

“Ah, that is my secret!”

During this conversation a hired fiacre, well appointed, had stopped beside the road, and Eugenie Gontier descended from it, inquiring of an officer belonging to the grounds where she could find General de Prerolles. When the officer had pointed out the General to her, she started to walk toward him; but, on seeing her former lover leaning familiarly against the door of Zibeline’s carriage, she immediately retraced her steps and quickly reentered her own.

“There is no longer any doubt about it!” said Mademoiselle de Vermont, who had been observing Eugenie’s movements. “Mademoiselle Gontier has made a fixed resolution to avoid meeting me.”

“That is because she is jealous of you!” said Lenaieff naively.



“Jealous? And why?” said Zibeline, blushing.

Visibly embarrassed, Henri drew out his watch in order to avert his countenance.

“Midday!” he cried. “This is the hour for the return of the troops to their barracks. You would do well not to delay in starting for home, Mademoiselle. The roads will be very crowded, and your horses will not be able to trot. I beg your pardon for taking away your model, my dear Delorme, but I really must be off.”

“It is all the same to me; I have finished my sketch,” said the painter, closing his portfolio.

At this moment, as the military governor passed near them, on his way to the crossway of the Pyramid, Henri made a movement as if to rejoin him.

“Do not disturb yourself, General de Prerolles,” said the military governor. “The compliments which I have made you on the fine appearance of your troops are probably not so agreeable to you as those to which you are listening at present!”



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And saluting Mademoiselle de Vermont courteously, he went his way.

“Now you are free, Henri. Suppose we accompany Mademoiselle back to Paris?” suggested Lenaieff, seeming to read his friend’s mind.

“What an honor for me!” Valentine exclaimed.

The General made a sign to his orderly, who approached to receive his instructions.

“Tell the brigadier-generals that I am about to depart. I need no more escort than two cavalymen for General Lenaieff and myself. Now I am ready, Mademoiselle,” Henri continued, turning toward Valentine. “If you will be guided by me, we should do well to reach the fortifications by way of the Lake of Saint-Mande.”

She made a little sound with her tongue, and the two cobs set off in the direction indicated, the crowds they passed stopping to admire their high action, and asking one another who was that pretty woman who was escorted by two generals, the one French, the other a foreigner.

“I must look like a treaty of peace in a Franco-Russian alliance!” said Zibeline, gayly.

The sun shone brightly, the new leaves were quivering on the trees, the breeze bore to the ear the echo of the military bands.

Animated by the sound, the two cobs went ahead at a great pace, but they were kept well in hand by their mistress, who was dressed this morning in a simple navy-blue costume, with a small, oval, felt hat, ornamented with two white wings, set on in a manner that made the wearer resemble a valkyrie. Her whip, an unnecessary accessory, lay across the seat at her right, on which side of the carriage Henri rode.

The General’s eyes missed none of the graceful movements of the young girl. And his reflections regarding her, recently interrupted, returned in full force, augmenting still more his regret at the inexorable fate that separated him from her. “What a pity!” he thought in his turn, repeating unconsciously the phrase so often uttered by his sister.

Arrived at the Place du Trene, Valentine stopped her horses a moment, and addressed her two cavaliers:

“I thank you for your escort, gentlemen. But however high may be your rank, I really can not go through Paris looking like a prisoner between two gendarmes! So good-by! I shall see you this evening perhaps, but good-by for the present.”

They gave her a military salute, and the carriage disappeared in the Faubourg St. Antoine, while the two horsemen followed the line of the quays along the Boulevard Diderot.



CHAPTER XXIV

THE CHALLENGE

That person who, in springtime, between ten o'clock and midday, never has walked beside the bridle-path in the Bois de Boulogne, under the deep shade of the trees, can form no idea of the large number of equestrians that for many years have been devoted to riding along that delightful and picturesque road.



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To see and to be seen constitutes the principal *raison d'être* of this exercise, where the riders traverse the same path going and coming, a man thus being able to meet more than once the fair one whom he seeks, or a lady to encounter several times a cavalier who interests her.

On this more and more frequented road, the masculine element displayed different costumes, according to the age and tastes of each rider. The young men appeared in careless array: leggings, short coats, and small caps. The older men, faithful to early traditions, wore long trousers, buttoned-up redingotes, and tall hats, like those worn by their fathers, as shown in the pictures by Alfred de Dreux.

For the feminine element the dress is uniform. It consists of a riding-habit of black or dark blue, with bodice and skirt smoothly molded to the form by one of the two celebrated habit-makers, Youss or Creed. The personal presence alone varied, according to the degree of perfection of the model.

A cylindrical hat, a little straight or turned-over collar, a cravat tied in a sailor's knot, a gardenia in the buttonhole, long trousers and varnished boots completed the dress of these modern Amazons, who, having nothing in common with the female warriors of ancient times, are not deprived, as were those unfortunates, of any of their feminine charms.

The military element is represented by officers of all grades from generals to sub-lieutenants, in morning coats, with breeches and high boots, forbidden under the Second Empire, but the rule at present.

At the top of the Pre-Catelan, the path is crossed by the Bagatelle road to the lakes, a point of intersection situated near a glade where the ladies were fond of stopping their carriages to chat with those passing on horseback. A spectator might have fancied himself at the meet of a hunting-party, lacking the whippers-in and the dogs.

A few days after the review at Vincennes, on a bright morning in May, a file of victorias and pony-chaises were strung out along this sylvan glade, and many persons had alighted from them. Announcing their arrival by trumpet-blasts, two or three vehicles of the Coaching Club, headed by that of the Duc de Mont had discharged a number of pretty passengers, whose presence soon caused the halt of many gay cavaliers.

Several groups were formed, commenting on the news of the day, the scandal of the day before, the fete announced for the next day.

More serious than the others, the group surrounding Madame de Montgeron strolled along under the trees in the side paths which, in their windings, often came alongside of the bridle-path.



“What has become of Mademoiselle de Vermont, Duchess?” inquired Madame de Lisieux, who had been surprised not to find Zibeline riding with their party.

“She is in the country, surrounded by masons, occupied in the building of our Orphan Asylum. The time she required before making over the property to us expires in two weeks.”



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"It is certainly very singular that we do not know where we are to go for the ceremonies of inauguration," said Madame Desvanneaux, in her usual vinegary tones.

"I feel at liberty to tell you that the place is not far away, and the journey thence will not fatigue you," said the president, with the air of one who has long known what she has not wished to reveal heretofore.

"The question of fatigue should not discourage us when it is a matter of doing good," said M. Desvanneaux. "Only, in the opinion of the founders of the Orphan Asylum, it should be situated in the city of Paris itself."

"The donor thought that open fields and fresh air would be better for the children."

"Land outside of Paris costs very much less, of course; that is probably the real reason," said M. Desvanneaux.

"Poor Zibeline! you are well hated!" Madame de Nointel could not help saying.

"We neither like nor dislike her, Madame. We regard her as indifferently as we do that," the churchwarden replied, striking down a branch with the end of his stick, with the superb air of a Tarquin.

Still gesticulating, he continued:

"The dust that she throws in the eyes of others does not blind us, that is all!"

The metaphor was not exactly happy, for at that instant the unlucky man received full in his face a broadside of gravel thrown by the hoofs of a horse which had been frightened by the flourishing stick, and which had responded to the menace by a violent kick.

This steed was none other than Seaman, ridden by Mademoiselle de Vermont. She had recognized the Duchess and turned her horse back in order to offer her excuses for his misconduct, the effects of which Madame Desvanneaux tried to efface by brushing off the gravel with the corner of her handkerchief.

"What has happened?" asked General de Prerolles, who at that moment cantered up, mounted on Aida.

"Oh, nothing except that Mademoiselle has just missed killing my husband with that wicked animal of hers!" cried the Maegera, in a fury.

"Mademoiselle might turn the accusation against him," Madame de Nointel said, with some malice. "It was he who frightened her horse."



The fiery animal, with distended veins and quivering nostrils, snorted violently, cavorted sidewise, and tried to run. Zibeline needed all her firmness of grasp to force him, without allowing herself to be thrown, to stand still on the spot whence had come the movement that had alarmed him.

“Your horse needs exercise,” said Henri to the equestrienne. “You ought to give him an opportunity to do something besides the formal trot around this path.”

“I should be able to do so, if ever we could have our match,” said Zibeline. “Will you try it now?”

“Come on!”

She nodded, gave him her hand an instant, and they set off, side by side, followed by Zibeline’s groom, no less well mounted than she, and wearing turned-over boots, bordered with a band of fawn-colored leather, according to the fashion.



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CHAPTER XXV

THE AMAZON HAS A FALL

They were a well-matched pair: he, the perfect type of the elegant and always youthful soldier; she, the most dashing of all the Amazons in the Bois, to quote the words of Edmond Delorme.

Everyone was familiar with the personal appearance of both riders, and recognized them, but until now Mademoiselle de Vermont had always ridden alone, and now to see her accompanied by the gallant General, whose embroidered kepi glittered in the sunlight, was a new spectacle for the gallery.

The people looked at them all the more because Seaman was still prancing, but without unseating his mistress, who held him at any gait or any degree of swiftness that pleased her.

"What a good seat you have!" said Henri.

"That is the first real compliment you ever have paid me. I shall appropriate it immediately, before you have time to retract it," Zibeline replied.

At the circle of Melezes, Henri proposed to turn to the right, in order to reach Longchamp.

"A flat race! You are joking!" Zibeline cried, turning to the left, toward the road of La Vierge,

"You don't intend that we shall run a steeplechase, I hope."

"On the contrary, that is exactly my intention! You are not afraid to try it, are you?"

"Not on my own account, but on yours."

"You know very well that I never am daunted by any obstacle."

"Figuratively, yes; but in riding a horse it is another matter."

"All the more reason why I should not be daunted now," Zibeline insisted.

When they arrived at the public square of the Cascades, in front of the Auteuil hippodrome, she paused a moment between the two lakes, uncertain which course to take.



It was Thursday, the day of the races. The vast ground, enclosed on all sides by a fence, had been cleared, since early morning, of the boards covering the paths reserved for pedestrians on days when there was no racing; but it was only eleven o'clock, and the place was not yet open to the paying public. Several workmen, in white blouses, went along the track, placing litters beside the obstacles where falls occurred most frequently.

"Do you think the gatekeeper will allow us to enter at this hour?" Zibeline asked.

"I hope not!" Henri replied.

"Well, then, I shall enter without his permission! You are free to declare me the winner. I shall be left to make a walkover, I see!" And setting off at a gallop along the bridle-path, which was obstructed a little farther on by the fence itself, she struck her horse resolutely, and with one audacious bound sprang over the entrance gate. She was now on the steeplechase track.

"You are mad!" cried the General, who, as much concerned for her safety as for his own pride, urged on his mare, and, clearing the fence, landed beside Zibeline on the other side.



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"All right!" she cried, in English, dropping her whip, as the starter drops the flag at the beginning of a race.

The die was cast. Henri bent over Aida's neck, leaning his hands upon her withers in an attitude with which experience had made him familiar, and followed the Amazon, determined to win at all hazards.

Zibeline's groom, an Englishman, formerly a professional jockey, had already jumped the fence, in spite of the cries of the guard, who ran to prevent him, and coolly galloped after his mistress, keeping at his usual distance.

The first two hedges, which were insignificant obstacles for such horses, were crossed without effort.

"Not the brook, I beg of you!" cried Henri, seeing that, instead of running past the grandstand, Zibeline apparently intended to attempt this dangerous feat.

"Come on! Seaman would never forgive me if I balk at it!" she cried, riding fearlessly down the slope,

The good horse gathered up his four feet on the brink, took one vigorous leap, appearing for a second to hover over the water; then he fell lightly on the other side of the stream, with a seesaw movement, to which the intrepid Amazon accommodated herself by leaning far back. The rebound threw her forward a little, but she straightened herself quickly and went on.

The General, who had slackened his pace that he might not interfere with her leap, gave vent to a sigh of relief. He pressed Aida's flanks firmly, and the big Irish mare jumped after her competitor, with the majestic dignity of her race.

Reassured by the 'savoir-faire' of his companion, the former winner of the military steeplechase felt revive within himself all his ardor for the conflict, and he hastened to make up the distance he had lost.

The two horses, now on the west side of the racetrack, were almost neck-and-neck, and it would have been difficult to prognosticate which had the better chance of victory. Zibeline's light weight gave Seaman the advantage, but Aida gained a little ground every time she leaped an obstacle; so that, after passing the hurdles and the third hedge, the champions arrived simultaneously at the summit of the hill, from which point the track extends in a straight line, parallel with the Allee des Fortifications.

Feeling himself urged on still harder, the English horse began to lay back his ears and pull so violently on the rein that his rider had all she could do to hold him, and lacked sufficient strength to direct his course. Seeing Zibeline's danger, Henri hastened to slacken his horse's pace, but it was too late: the almost perpendicular declivity of the

other side of the hill added fresh impetus to the ungovernable rush of Seaman, who suddenly became wild and reckless.



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The situation was all the more critical for the reason that the next obstacle was a brook, only two metres wide, but of which the passage was obstructed on the farther side of the track by heavy beams, laid one on top of another, solidly riveted and measuring one metre and ten millimetres from the base to the summit. The excited horse charged obliquely toward this obstruction with all his might. Paying no more attention to the pressure upon his bit, he rose in the air, but as he had not given himself sufficient time to take plenty of room for the leap, his hoofs struck violently against the top beam, the force of resistance of which threw him over on one side; his hindquarters turned in the air, and he fell in a heap on the other side of the obstacle, sending up a great splash of water as he went into the brook.

Had Zibeline been crushed by the weight of the horse in this terrible fall, or, not having been able to free herself from him, had she been drowned under him? Henri uttered a hoarse cry, struck his spurs into the sides of his mare, crossed the brook breathlessly, stopping on the other side as soon as he could control his horse's pace; then, rushing back, he leaped to the ground to save the poor girl, if there was still time to do so.

Zibeline lay inanimate on the grass, her face lying against the earth. By a lucky chance, the horse had fallen on his right side, so that his rider's limbs and skirt had not been caught. Unhorsed by the violence of the shock, Zibeline had gone over the animal's head and fallen on the other side of the brook. Her Amazon hat, so glossy when she had set out, was now crushed, and her gloves were torn and soiled with mud; which indicated that she had fallen on her head and her hands.

Henri knelt beside her, passed his arm around her inert and charming body, and drew her tenderly toward him. Her eyes were half-open and dull, her lips pale; her nose, the nostrils of which were usually well dilated, had a pinched look; and a deadly pallor covered that face which only a moment before had been so rosy and smiling.

These signs were the forerunners of death, which the officer had recognized so many times on the battlefield. But those stricken ones had at least been men, devoting themselves to the risks of warfare; while in the presence of this young girl lying before him, looking upon this victim of a reckless audacity to which he felt he had lent himself too readily, the whole responsibility for the accident seemed to him to rest upon his own shoulders, and a poignant remorse tore his heart.

He removed her cravat, unhooked her bodice, laid his ear against her breast, from which an oppressed breathing still arose.

Two laborers hurried to open the gate and soon arrived at the spot with a litter, guided by the groom, whose horse had refused to jump the brook, and who since then had followed the race on foot outside the track. While the General placed Zibeline on the litter, the groom took Aida by the bridle, and the sad procession made its way slowly toward the enclosure surrounding the weighing-stand.



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As for Seaman, half submerged in the stream, and with an incurable fracture of the leg, nothing was left to do for the poor animal but to kill him.

CHAPTER XXVI

AN UNCONSCIOUS AVOWAL

Walking slowly, step by step, beside her whose power had so quickly and so wholly subjugated him, watching over her removal with more than paternal solicitude, Henri de Prerolles, sustained by a ray of hope, drew a memorandum-book from his pocket, wrote upon a slip of paper a name and an address, and, giving it to the groom, ordered him to go ahead of the litter and telephone to the most celebrated surgeon in Paris, requesting him to go as quickly as possible to the domicile of Mademoiselle de Vermont, and, meantime, to send with the greatest despatch one of the eight-spring carriages from the stables.

It was noon by the dial on the grand-stand when the litter was finally deposited in a safe place. The surgeon could hardly arrive in less than two hours; therefore, the General realized that he must rely upon his own experience in rendering the first necessary aid.

He lifted Valentine's hand, unbuttoned the glove, laid his finger on her pulse, and counted the pulsations, which were weak, slow, and irregular.

While the wife of the gate-keeper kept a bottle of salts at the nostrils of the injured girl, Henri soaked a handkerchief in tincture of arnica and sponged her temples with it; then, pouring some drops of the liquid into a glass of water, he tried in vain to make her swallow a mouthful. Her teeth, clenched by the contraction of muscles, refused to allow it to pass into her throat. At the end of half an hour, the inhalation of the salts began to produce a little effect; the breath came more regularly, but that was the only symptom which announced that the swoon might soon terminate. The landau with the high springs arrived. The General ordered the top laid back, and helped to lift and place upon the cushions on the back seat the thin mattress on which Zibeline lay; then he took his place on the front seat, made the men draw the carriage-top back into its proper position, and the equipage rolled smoothly, and without a jar, to its destination. On the way they met the first carriages that had arrived at the Auteuil hippodrome, the occupants of which little suspected what an exciting dramatic incident had occurred just before the races. Zibeline's servants, by whom she was adored, awaited their mistress at the threshold, and for her maids it was an affair of some minutes to undress her and lay her in her own bed. During this delay, the surgeon, who had hastened to answer the call, found Henri nervously walking about from one drawing-room to the other; and, having received information as to the details of the fall, he soon entered the bedchamber. While awaiting the sentence of life or of death which must soon be pronounced, he who considered himself



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the chief cause of this tragic event continued to pace to and fro in the gallery—that gallery where, under the intoxication of a waltz, the demon of temptation had so quickly demolished all his resolutions of resistance. A half-hour—an age!—elapsed before the skilled practitioner reappeared. “There is no fracture,” he said, “but the cerebral shock has been such that I can not as yet answer for the consequences. If the powerful reactive medicine which I have just given should bring her back to her senses soon, her mental faculties will suffer no harm. If not, there is everything to fear. I will return in three hours,” he added. Without giving a thought to the conventionalities, Henri entered the bedchamber, to the great astonishment of the maids, and, installing himself at the head of the bed, he decided not to leave that spot until Valentine had regained her senses, should she ever regain them. An hour passed thus, while Henri kept the same attitude, erect, attentive, motionless, with stray scraps of his childhood’s prayers running through his brain. Suddenly the heavy eyelids of the wounded girl were lifted; the dulness of the eyes disappeared; her body made an involuntary attempt to change its position; the nostrils dilated; the lips quivered in an effort to speak. Youth and life had triumphed over death. With painful slowness, she tried to raise her hand to her head, the seat of her pain, where, though half paralyzed, thought was beginning to return. Her eyes wandered to and fro in the shadowy room, seeking to recognize the surroundings. A ray of light, filtering through the window-curtains, showed her the anxious face bending tenderly over her. “Henri!” she murmured, in a soft, plaintive voice. That name, pronounced thus, the first word uttered after her long swoon, revealed her secret. Never had a more complete yet modest avowal been more simply expressed; was it not natural that he should be present at her reentrance into life, since she loved him? With women, the sentiment of love responds to the most diverse objects. The ordinary young girl of Zibeline’s age, either before or after her sojourn in a convent, considers that a man of thirty has arrived at middle age, and that a man of forty is absolutely old. Should she accept a man of either of these ages, she does it because a fortune, a title, or high social rank silences her other tastes, and her ambition does the rest. But, with an exceptional woman, like Mademoiselle de Vermont, brought up in view of wide horizons, in the midst of plains cleared by bold pioneers, among whom the most valorous governed the others, a man like General de Prerolles realized her ideal all the more, because both their natures presented the same striking characteristics: carelessness of danger, and frankness carried to its extremest limit. Therefore, this declaration—to use the common expression—entirely free from artifice or affectation, charmed Henri for one reason, yet, on the other hand, redoubled his perplexity.



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How could he conciliate his scruples of conscience with the aspirations of his heart? The problem seemed then as insoluble as when it had been presented the first time. But Valentine was saved. For the moment that was the essential point, the only one in question. The involuntary revelation of her secret had brought the color to her cheeks, the light to her eyes, a smile to her lips, in spite of the leaden band that seemed still pressing upon her head. "How you have frightened me!" said Henri, in a low voice, seating himself on the side of the bed and taking her hand. "Is that true?" she asked, softly pressing his fingers. "Hush!" he said, making a movement to enjoin silence. She obeyed, and they remained a few moments thus. Nevertheless, he reflected that the account of the accident would soon be spread everywhere, that Valentine's new friends would hear about it as soon as they arrived at the race-track that day, and that he could no longer prolong his stay beside her.

"Are you leaving me so soon?" Valentine murmured, when he said that he must go.

"I am going to tell my sister and the Chevalier de Sainte-Foy of your mishap."

"Very well," she replied, as if already she had no other desire than to follow his wishes.

He gave the necessary orders, and again took his place beside the bed, awaiting the second visit of the doctor, whose arrival was simultaneous with that of the Duchess.

This time the verdict was altogether favorable, with no mention of the possibility of any aggravating circumstances. An inevitable feverishness, and a great lassitude, which must be met with absolute repose for several days, would be the only consequences of this dangerous prank.

The proprieties resumed their normal sway, and it was no longer possible for Henri to remain beside the charming invalid.

CHAPTER XXVII

DISTRACTION

The Duchesse de Montgeron, who had passed the rest of the day with Mademoiselle de Vermont, did not return to her own dwelling until eight o'clock that evening, bearing the most reassuring news.

Longing for fresh air and exercise, Henri went out after dinner, walked through the Champs-Elysees, and traversed the crossing at l'Etoile, in order to approach the spot where Zibeline lay ill.



If one can imagine the feelings of a man of forty-five, who is loved for himself, under the most flattering and unexpected conditions, one can comprehend the object of this nocturnal walk and the long pause that Henri made beneath the windows of Zibeline's apartment. A small garden, protected by a light fence, was the only obstacle that separated them. But how much more insuperable was the barrier which his own principles had raised between this adorable girl and himself.

Had he not told his sister, confided to Eugenie Gontier, and reiterated to any one that would listen to him, the scruples which forbade him ever to think of marriage? To change this decision, in asking for the hand of Mademoiselle de Vermont, would-in appearance, at least—sacrifice to the allurements of wealth the proud poverty which he had long borne so nobly.

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But the demon of temptation was then, as always, lurking in the shadow, the sole witness of this duel to the death between prejudice and love.

When he returned to his rooms he found another note from his former mistress:

“You have just had a terrible experience, my dear friend. Nothing that affects you can be indifferent to me. I beg you to believe, notwithstanding the grief which our separation causes me, in all the prayers that I offer for your happiness.

“*Ariadne.*”

“My happiness? My torture, rather!” he said, the classic name of Ariadne suggesting the idea that the pseudonym of Tantalus might well be applied to himself.

But he had long kept a rule to write as little as possible, and was guarded in making reply to any letter, especially to such a communication as this.

When he left the house the next morning, on his way to attend to military duties, he learned that his sister had gone away early on an excursion to one of the suburbs, and that she would not return until evening. As the Duchess was the only person who had been initiated into the mystery surrounding Zibeline on the subject of the building of the Orphan Asylum, it was evident that she had gone to take her place in the directing of the work.

In the afternoon Henri called to inquire for the invalid, and was received by the Chevalier de Sainte-Foy. She had had a quiet night; a little fever had appeared toward morning, and, above all, an extreme weakness, requiring absolute quiet and freedom from any excitement. On an open register in the reception-room were inscribed the names of all those persons who had called to express their interest in Mademoiselle de Vermont: Constantin Lenaieff, the Lisieux, the Nointels, Edmond Delorme, the Baron de Samoreau, and others. Only the Desvanneaux had shown no sign of life. Their Christian charity did not extend so far as that.

Henri added his name to the list, and for several days he returned each morning to inscribe it anew, feeling certain that, as soon as Valentine was able to be placed half-reclining on a couch, she would give orders that he should be admitted to her presence. But nothing of the kind occurred.

On the evening of the fifth day after the accident, the Duchess informed her brother that their young friend had been taken to the country, where it was thought a complete cure would sooner be effected.

This hasty departure, made without any preliminary message, caused Henri to feel the liveliest disappointment.



Had he deceived himself, then? Was it, after all, only by chance that she had so tenderly pronounced his name, and had that familiar appellative only been drawn from her involuntarily because of her surprise at beholding his unexpected presence at her bedside?

Regarding the matter from this point of view, the whole romance that he had constructed on a fragile foundation had really never existed save in his own imagination!



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At this thought his self-esteem suffered cruelly. He felt a natural impulse to spring into a carriage and drive to the dwelling of Eugenie Gontier, and there to seek forgetfulness. But he felt that his bitterness would make itself known even there, and that such a course would be another affront to the dignity of a woman of heart, whose loyalty to himself he never had questioned.

Try to disguise it as he would, his sombre mood made itself apparent, especially to his brother-in-law, who had no difficulty in guessing the cause, without allowing Henri to suspect that he divined it.

The date for the formal transfer of the Orphan Asylum to the committee had been fixed for the fifteenth day of May.

On the evening of the fourteenth, at the hour when the General was signing the usual military documents in his bureau, a domestic presented to him a letter which, he said, had just been brought in great haste by a messenger on horseback:

The superscription, "To Monsieur the General the Marquis de Prerolles," was inscribed in a long, English hand, elegant and regular. The orderly gave the letter to his chief, who dismissed him with a gesture before breaking the seal. The seal represented, without escutcheon or crown, a small, wild animal, with a pointed muzzle, projecting teeth, and shaggy body, under which was a word Henri expected to find: Zibeline!

The letter ran thus:

"My dear general:

"An officer, like yourself, whose business it is to see that his orders are obeyed, will understand that I have not dared, even in your favor, to infringe on those imposed upon me by the doctor. But those orders have been withdrawn! If you have nothing better to do, come to-morrow, with your sister, to inspect our asylum, before Monsieur Desvanneaux takes possession of it!

"Your military eye will be able to judge immediately whether anything is lacking in the quarters. Yours affectionately,

"Valentine de Vermont.

"P.S.—Poor Seaman is dead! I beg you to carry this sad news to his friend Aida. V."

If a woman's real self is revealed in her epistolary style, finesse, good-humor, and sprightliness were characterised in this note. Zibeline's finesse had divined Henri's self-deception; her good-humor sought to dissipate it; and her sprightliness was evidenced by her allusions to M. Desvanneaux and the loss of her horse.



When they found themselves reunited at the dinner-hour, the Duchess said simply to her brother:

“You must have received an invitation to-day from Mademoiselle de Vermont. Will you accompany us tomorrow?”

“Yes, certainly. But where? How? At what hour?”

“We must leave here at one o’clock. Don’t disturb yourself about any other detail—we shall look after everything.”

“Good! I accept.”



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As he was not so curious as the Desvanneaux, it mattered little to him to what place they took him, so long as he should find Zibeline at the end of the journey.

At the appointed hour the brother and sister drove to the Gare du Nord. The Duke, a director of the road, who had been obliged to attend a convocation of the Council until noon, had preceded them. He was waiting for them beside the turnstile at the station, having already procured their tickets and reserved a carriage in one of the omnibus trains from Paris to Treport which make stops at various suburban stations.

“Will it be a very long journey?” Henri asked, on taking his place in the carriage.

“Barely three-quarters of an hour,” said the Duke, as the train started on its way.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE VOW REDEEMED

The third road, constructed between the two lines which met at Creil, passing, the one by way of Chantilly, the other, by Pontoise, was not in existence in 1871, when, after the war, Jeanne and Henri de Prerolles went to visit the spot, already unrecognizable, where they had passed their childhood. L’Ile-d’Adam was at that time the nearest station; to day it is Presles, on the intermediate line, which they now took.

“This is our station,” said Madame de Montgeron, when the train stopped at Montsout. They descended from the carriage, and found on the platform two footmen, who conducted them to a large char-a-banc, to which were harnessed four dark bay Percherons, whose bridles were held by postilions in Zibeline’s livery, as correct in their appearance as those belonging to the imperial stables, when the sojourn of the court was at Compiègne or at Fontainebleau.

“Where are we going now, Jeanne?” asked Henri, whose heart seemed to him to contract at the sight of Maffliers, which he knew so well.

“A short distance from here,” his sister replied.

The horses set off, and, amid the sound of bells and the cracking of whips, the carriage reached the national road from Paris to Beauvais, which, from Montsout, passes around the railway by a rapid descent, from the summit of which is visible, on the right, the Chateau of Franconville; on the left, the village of Nerville perched on its crest.

One of the footmen on the rear seat held the reins, and a quarter of an hour later the carriage stopped just before arriving at the foot of Valpendant.



Valpendant had formerly been a feudal manor within the confines of Ile-de-France, built midway upon a hill, as its name indicated. On the side toward the plain was a moat, and the castle itself commanded the view of a valley, through which ran the little stream called Le Roi, which flows into the river Oise near the hamlet of Mours. Acquired in the fifteenth century by the lords of Prerolles, it had become an agricultural territory worked for their profit, first by forced labor, and later by farmers.

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Even recently, the courtyard, filled with squawking fowls and domestic animals of all kinds, and the sheds crowded with agricultural implements piled up in disorder, presented a scene of confusion frequent among cultivators, and significant of the alienation of old domains from their former owners.

“We have arrived!” said the Duchess, alighting first.

“What, is it here?” Henri exclaimed, his heart beating more quickly.

“Your old farm was for sale just at the time that Mademoiselle de Vermont was seeking an appropriate site for the Orphan Asylum. This spot appeared to her to combine all the desirable conditions, and she has wrought the transformation you are about to behold. It might as well be this place as another,” the Duchess added. “In my opinion, it is a sort of consolation offered to us by fate.”

“Be it so!” said Henri, in a tone of less conviction.

He followed his sister along the footpath of a bluff, which as children they had often climbed; while the carriage made a long detour in order to reach the main entrance to the grounds.

The footpath, winding along near the railway embankment, ended at a bridge, where Zibeline awaited the three visitors. A significant pressure of her hand showed Henri how little cause he had had for his apprehensions.

They entered. Seen from the main entrance, the metamorphosis of the place was complete.

The old tower that had served as a barn alone remained the same; it was somewhat isolated from the other building, and had been repaired in the style of its period, making a comfortable dwelling for the future director of the Asylum. Mademoiselle de Vermont occupied it temporarily.

On each side of the grounds, standing parallel, rose two fine buildings: on the ground floor of each were all the customary rooms and accessories found on model farms; on the upper floors were dormitories arranged to receive a large number of children of both sexes. There were schoolrooms, sewing-rooms, a chapel-in short, nothing was lacking to assist in the children’s intellectual and manual education.

“You have done things royally,” said the Duke to the happy donor, when, having finished the inspection of the premises, they returned to the directors’ room, indicated by a plate upon its door.



As for Henri, silent and absorbed, he hesitated between the dread of facing a new emotion and the desire to go once more to gaze upon the tower of Prerolles, hardly more than two kilometres distant.

“What is the matter with you, General?” Zibeline asked, observing that he did not appear to take pleasure in the surprise she had prepared.

“I lived here many years a long time ago,” he replied. “I am thinking of all that it recalls to me; and, if you would not consider it discourteous on my part, I should like to leave you for a little time to make a pilgrimage on foot around the neighborhood.”



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“Would you like to have me take you myself? I have a little English cart which can run about anywhere,” said Zibeline.

The proposition was tempting. The sweetness of a tete-a-tete might diminish the bitterness of recollections. He accepted.

She ordered the cart brought around, and they climbed into the small vehicle, which was drawn by a strong pony, driven by Zibeline herself.

“Which way?” she asked, when they had passed through the gates.

“To the right,” he said, pointing to a rough, half-paved slope, an abandoned part of what had been in former days the highway, which now joins the new road at the Beaumont tunnel.

Passing this point, and leaving on their left the state road of l’Ile-d’Adam, they drove through a narrow cross-cut, between embankments, by which one mounts directly to the high, plateau that overlooks the town of Presles.

The hill was steep, and the pony was out of breath. They were compelled to stop to allow him to rest.

“It is not necessary to go any farther,” said Henri to his companion. “I need only to take a few steps in order to see what interests me.”

“I will wait for you here,” she replied, alighting after him. “Don’t be afraid to leave me alone. The horse will not move; he is used to stopping.”

He left her gathering daisies, and walked resolutely to the panoramic point of view, where a strange and unexpected sight met his eyes!

All that had once been so dear to him had regained its former aspect. The kitchen-gardens had given place to the rich pastures, where yearling colts frisked gayly. The factory had disappeared, and the chateau had been restored to its original appearance. The walls enclosing the park had been rebuilt, and even several cleared places indicated the sites of cottages that had been pulled down.

Henri de Prerolles could hardly believe his eyes! Was he the sport of a dream or of one of those mirages which rise before men who travel across the sandy African deserts? The latitude and the position of the sun forbade this interpretation. But whence came it, then? What fairy had turned a magic ring in order to work this miracle?

A crackling of dry twigs under a light tread made him turn, and he beheld Zibeline, who had come up behind him.



The fairy was there, pale and trembling, like a criminal awaiting arrest.

“Is it you who have done this?” Henri exclaimed, with a sob which no human strength could have controlled.

“It is I!” she murmured, lowering her eyes. “I did it in the hope that some day you would take back that which rightfully belongs to you.”

“Rightfully, you say? By what act?”

“An act of restitution.”

“You never have done me any injury, and nothing authorizes me to accept such a gift from Mademoiselle de Vermont.”

“Vermont was the family name of my mother. When my father married her, he obtained leave to add it to his own. I am the daughter of Paul Landry.”



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“You!”

“Yes. The daughter of Paul Landry, whose fortune had no other origin than the large sum of which he despoiled you.”

Henri made a gesture of denial.

“Pardon me!” Zibeline continued. “He was doubly your debtor, since this sum had been increased tenfold when you rescued him from the Mexicans who were about to shoot him. ‘This is my revenge!’ you said to him, without waiting to hear a word from him. Your ruin was the remorse of his whole life. I knew it only when he lay upon his deathbed. Otherwise—”

She paused, then raised her head higher to finish her words.

“Never mind!” she went on. “That which he dared not do while living, I set myself to do after his death. When I came to Paris to inquire what had become of the Marquis de Prerolles, your glorious career answered for you; but even before I knew you I had become the possessor of these divided estates, which, reunited by me, must be restored to your hands. You are proud, Henri,” she added, with animation, “but I am none less proud than you. Judge, then, what I have suffered in realizing our situation: I, overwhelmed with riches, you, reduced to your officer’s pay. Is that a satisfaction to your pride? Very well! But to my own, it is the original stain, which only a restitution, nobly accepted by you, ever can efface!”

She paused, looking at him supplicatingly, her hands clasped. As he remained silent, she understood that he still hesitated, and continued:

“To plead my cause, to vanquish your resistance, as I am trying now to triumph over it, could be attempted with any chance of success only by a dear and tender friend; that is the reason why I sought to establish relations with—”

“With Eugenie Gontier?”

“But she would not consent to it—all the worse for her! For, since then, you and I have come to know each other well. Your prejudices have been overcome one by one. I have observed it well. I am a woman, and even your harshness has not changed my feelings, nor prevented me from believing that, in spite of yourself, you were beginning to love me. Have I been deceiving myself?—tell me!”

“You know that you have not, since, as I look at you and listen to you, I know not which I admire more—your beauty or the treasures of your heart!”

“Then come!”

“Whither?”

“To Prerolles, where all is ready to receive you.”

“Well, since this is a tale from the Arabian Nights, let us follow it to the end! I will go!” said Henri.

Browsing beside the road, the pony, left to himself, had advanced toward them, step by step, whinnying to his mistress. Valentine and Henri remounted the cart; which soon drew up before the gates of the chateau, where, awaiting them, reinstated in his former office, stood the old steward, bent and white with years.

The borders of the broad driveway were of a rich, deep green. Rose-bushes in full bloom adorned the smooth lawns. The birds trilled a welcome in jumping from branch to branch, and across the facade of the chateau the open windows announced to the surrounding peasantry the return of the prodigal master.



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At the top of the flight of steps Valentine stepped back to allow Henri to pass before her; then, changing her mind, she advanced again.

“No, you are at home,” she said. “It is I that must enter first!”

He followed her docilely, caring no longer to yield to any other will than hers.

Within the chateau, thanks to the complicity of the Duchess, the furnishings resembled as closely as possible those of former days. The good fairy had completed successfully two great works: the restoration of the chateau and the building of the asylum. The inhabitants of the one would be so much the better able to foresee the needs of the other.

Having explored one of the wings, they returned to the central hall. Mademoiselle de Vermont made a sign to the steward to remain there, and beckoned to Henri to accompany her to the historic gallery. After they had entered it, she closed the door. The family portraits had been rehung in their former places, in chronological order, and, in its proper place, figured that of the General of Division the Marquis de Prerolles, in full uniform, mounted on Aida, the portrait being the work of Edmond Delorme.

At this sight, touched to the depths of his heart, Henri knelt before Valentine, and carried her hand to his lips.

“I adore you!” he said, without attempting to hide the tears of gratitude that fell upon those generous hands.

“Do you, indeed?” Zibeline murmured.

“You shall see!” he replied, rising. “Come, in your turn.”

He led her before the portrait of the ancestral marshal of France, and said:

“Twenty-three years ago I vowed before that portrait either to vanquish the enemy or to regain with honor all that I had lost at play. I have kept my word. Will you be my wife?”

“Ah, you know my heart is yours!” Zibeline whispered, hiding her face upon his shoulder.

The door at the end of the gallery opened; the Duc and the Duchesse de Montgeron appeared. Henri took Zibeline’s hand and approached them.

“The Marquise de Prerolles!” he said, presenting her to his sister and her husband.



CHAPTER XXIX

THE MARQUISE DE PREROLLES

The next day a special train landed the fair patronesses at the station of Presles, whence Zibeline's carriages conducted them to Valpendant.

The deed of gift was signed before M. Durand and his colleague, a notary of Pontoise.

This formality fulfilled, M. Desvanneaux, whose own role, for a moment overshadowed, appeared to him to renew its importance, took the floor and said:

"It remains to us, Mesdames, to assure the support of the Orphan Asylum by means of an annual income."

"The Marquis and the Marquise de Prerolles assume this responsibility," said the ministerial officer, treasurer of the Asylum. "This mutual engagement will form the object of a special clause in the drawing up of their contract."



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In this way was the news of the approaching marriage between Valentine and Henri announced to the Society.

“The little intriguer!” murmured the churchwarden, nudging the elbow of his Maegera.

The General, who noted the effect which this announcement had produced upon the peevish pair, divined the malicious words upon the hypocritical lips. He drew the husband aside, and put one hand upon his shoulder.

“Desvanneaux,” he said, “you have known me twenty-five years, and you know that I am a man of my word. If ever a malevolent word from you regarding my wife should come to my ears, I shall elongate yours to such a degree that those of King Midas will be entirely eclipsed! Remember that!”

The ceremony took place six weeks later, in the church of St. Honore-d'Eylau, which was not large enough to hold the numerous public and the brilliant corps of officers that assisted.

The witnesses for the bridegroom were the military governor of Paris and the Duc de Montgeron. Those of the bride were the aide-de-camp General Lenaieff, in full uniform, wearing an astrachan cap and a white cloak with the Russian eagle fastened in the fur; and the Chevalier de Sainte-Foy.

On the evening before, a last letter from his former mistress had come to the General:

“I have heard all the details of your romance, my dear Henri. Its conclusion is according to all dramatic rules, and I congratulate you without reserve.

“If, on the eve of contracting this happy union, an examination of your conscience should suggest to you some remorse for having abandoned me so abruptly, let me say that no shadow, not even the lightest, must cloud the serenity of this joyous day: I am about to leave the stage forever, to become the wife of the Baron de Samoreau!

“Always affectionately yours,
“*Eugenie Gontier.*”

ETEXT editor's bookmarks:

All that was illogical in our social code
Only a man, wavering and changeable
Their Christian charity did not extend so far as that
There are mountains that we never climb but once

ETEXT editor's bookmarks for the entire ZEBELINE:



All that was illogical in our social code
Ambiguity has no place, nor has compromise
But if this is our supreme farewell, do not tell me so!
Chain so light yesterday, so heavy to-day
Every man is his own master in his choice of liaisons
If I do not give all I give nothing
Indulgence of which they stand in need themselves
Life goes on, and that is less gay than the stories
Men admired her; the women sought some point to criticise
Only a man, wavering and changeable
Ostensibly you sit at the feast without paying the cost

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Paris has become like a little country town in its gossip
The night brings counsel
Their Christian charity did not extend so far as that
There are mountains that we never climb but once
You are in a conquered country, which is still more dangerous