REFINING FIRES

A NOVEL

BY

ALICE DEASE

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REFINING FIRES

CHAPTER I

MADAME MAUVOISIN'S VISITOR

THURSDAY was Madame Mauvoisin's "At Home" day, and her beautiful apartment in the Rue Lafayette was prepared for the coming of her visitors. A wood fire burned brightly on the hearth, and the flames were reflected on the polished fender, and on the brass dogs that kept it in its place. The deep colour of the beautiful Smyrna mats which were strewn over the floor glowed warmly in the light of the flames, making a rich background to the hothouse plants which had evidently been brought in to decorate the room for the occasion.

The furniture belonged to no special period, so that the owner, in arranging it, was not hampered by the laws of style or fashion; and

the chairs, richly upholstered in brocaded satin, were placed as comfort and convenience dictated. In an alcove at one end of the room preparations were laid for five-o'clock tea, an institution now almost as important in Paris as it is in London. Half-a-dozen little tables, evidently belonging to a set which fitted into each other when not in use, were placed at intervals along the wall; and, besides the necessary tea things and numerous dishes of delicious little cakes, there were ornamental decanters of Spanish wines and pretty liqueur glasses for those who had not acquired the foreign taste for tea. Everything in the room, down to the smallest detail, was in perfect taste; and yet the whole was laid out according to the latest dictates of fashion.

Madame Mauvoisin herself was seated on a large Turkish divan, surrounded by innumerable cushions; and, whilst waiting for her visitors, she was idly reading the latest sensational novel that the people of her world were talking about. Her hands were soft and white—the hands of a woman who spent time and trouble upon her personal adornment. Her black silk gown was made with the sim-

plicity which only the very best dressmakers dare to recommend; and the sombre folds gave a certain symmetry to the figure which age had begun to coarsen. She was already well past fifty; but time had touched her lightly, and it was only during the last year or two that her mirror had shown her that the inevitable sorrows of life cannot be borne without some trace of their existence becoming visible. The only acknowledgment she made of coming age was the piece of finest Mechlin lace which lay over her abundant hair, that was still soft and brown under its gossamer covering.

In spite of the startling nature of her book as revealed by its title, Madame Mauvoisin's eyes kept straying from its pages to the clock; and before long it was cast aside altogether, for the bell in the hall of the apartment announced the coming of the first of her guests. A heavy, embroidered portière hung over the doorway, and this was held aside by the footman as he said:

"Madame Philippe Gerard."

Madame Mauvoisin rose from her seat and held out her hands in welcome.

"You!" she cried in tones of surprise. "My

dear Madame Gerard, this is a great pleasure. I had no idea you had already returned from Russia."

"We have been in Paris only a few days," explained her visitor, smilingly. "I should have come to see you sooner, only, fearing to miss you, I waited for your 'At Home' day."

"I am glad you have come so early," said Madame Mauvoisin, drawing forward an arm-chair. "Your long absence has not made you forget your friends."

"It has only made me more anxious than ever to see them," replied Madame Gerard.

"Curiously enough, my husband and I were talking of you this morning," went on Madame Mauvoisin; "and I said that if you stayed away much longer you would become a naturalised Russian."

"Thank you!—no," laughed Madame Gerard. "I am more French than ever—Parisian to my finger tips. This long exile has only made me love my country better than before."

"Then you will never make up your mind to leave it again, I suppose?"

"Never to live in Russia again," replied the returned traveller. "We went only to Volvoof,

so that my husband might put all in order for the sale of the estate; and things took longer to arrange than we had foreseen."

"Well, at least you will have a great deal to tell us of your travels."

"Not even that, I am afraid. You see, travelling is so easy nowadays that there is no hope or fear of adventures. Of course, living as we did, we saw a great deal that the traveller merely passes by. Some day I will give you my impressions of the Berezina coast. But, first of all, I want you to tell me all about yourself. To begin with, how is M. Mauvoisin?"

"He is very well, thank you; and, as usual, very busy."

"I need not ask how you are," went on Madame Gerard. "You have not changed in the least. You look as young and as blooming as ever."

"As young! That is only flattery. I am becoming quite an old woman." And Madame Mauvoisin glanced at the mirror, where her reflection showed plainly how little her words meant.

"Indeed it is not flattery," said Madame

Gerard. "I can hardly believe you are a day older than when I left Paris five years ago, and yet there has been time for many changes. Now tell me about your children?"

"My children!" Madame Mauvoisin's features contracted and her smile died away. "You must have heard what has happened," she said quickly,—"I mean about my son," she added in answer to her friend's look of interrogation.

Madame Gerard hesitated for a moment.

"I—I did hear that you had been disappointed," she said uncertainly.

"Disappointed! Say rather deceived—grossly deceived."

Leaning forward, she seized the tongs and began toying with the burning logs.

"I am afraid it has been a grief to you," said Madame Gerard, gently.

"It has been, and is, and always will be a grief." Madame Mauvoisin's voice was harsh and decided. "I shall never get over it—never!" And her lips closed as though she were registering an oath.

Madame Gerard sighed sympathetically.

"Of course I heard no details," she said

tentatively, not certain how far her friend wished to confide in her.

"They had been married only six months," continued Madame Mauvoisin, "when the blow came; and all that Raoul ever saw or will see of her money is a paltry nine thousand francs."

"Nine thousand francs!" said Madame Gerard. "I thought that her fortune was secured."

"Not a penny more than that," replied Madame Mauvoisin. "Nominally, she had eight hundred thousand francs, but it was all swept away in her father's ruin."

For a moment there was silence, then Madame Gerard spoke again:

"We had been only a few weeks at Volvoof when we heard about it. I thought so much of you, and would have liked to write; but, being at such a distance, I knew so little—"

"What did you hear about it?" asked Madame Mauvoisin, cutting short her friend's condolences.

"They informed me that M. de Barli's cashier absconded, leaving the shareholders penniless."

"Say, rather, the shareholder," observed Madame Mauvoisin, bitterly. "There is only

one man in the world fool enough to have been so taken in."

"Then is everything lost?"

"Everything. The business was worth £100,000, besides Lucienne's fortune, on which M. de Barli undertook to pay six per cent. Apparently a most generous proposal!"

"How unfortunate that the capital was not invested elsewhere!"

"That is what I shall never get over. Fancy persuading a man like my husband—for Raoul, as you know, is so easy-going that he left all the settlements to his father—fancy getting round him and persuading him to leave all that money in a business on the verge of ruin!"

"Then M. de Barli refused to pay down his daughter's fortune in ready money?"

"Oh, no! He was not asked to do that. My husband agreed to leave it where such high interest was promised. You see, the marriage was a suitable one. Lucienne was an only child; and, rather than make difficulties, we accepted her father's terms. Who could have guessed that such a catastrophe was imminent? No credit seemed more secure in the business world than theirs."

"But M. de Barli—strictly between ourselves—had he no idea of what was impending?"

"Oh, no! I did not mean to insinuate that exactly, but he ought to have known. No, indeed. It came to him, as it did to us, as a thunderbolt. He was like a madman for days after that scoundrel took himself off."

"The unfortunate man!" said Madame Gerard. "How dreadful for him! Well, it is at least something that there is no blame attached—"

"Blame!—no blame!" cried Madame Mauvoisin. "What do you say to such imprudence, such blindness! Once, when my husband touched on the subject of securities with regard to this Lozares, M. de Barli absolutely refused to listen to him. If he had had twenty millions of money, I believe he would have entrusted that man with every penny of it."

"What an extraordinary infatuation!" murmured Madame Gerard.

"Indeed, you may well say so. He maintained to the last that such friendship as theirs, such family ties, made even suspicion an insult."

"Ah! then the wretch was a relation of the De Barlis?"

"No, thank goodness—no real relation! It seems that at the time of the Restoration, M. de Barli's father and the father of this Lozares were sent out together on some mission to Chili. The Lozares are Spaniards, and the two young men were brought up together—M. de Barli at least looking on the other as his brother. In fact, until all this came out, he seemed to consider him a sort of idol, a regular demigod. The De Barlis lived, as you know, at Poitiers, but Lozares carried on his business in Marseilles. It was more of a financial than a commercial affair. M. Mauvoisin went once to his office and found him alone, his desk littered with papers and telegrams, and a huge burglar-proof safe taking up half the room. He was in the midst of having large sums of money transferred from Saragossa to Havana. Most of his business was between Spain and the Colonies, and he must have gambled heavily on the exchange."

"Then he acted only as an intermediary for M. de Barli?"

"Not at all, my dear! Can you imagine such

folly, such wicked carelessness? He had in his hands every penny belonging to the De Barlis—a good three million francs, if not more—to do with as he pleased."

"But what about Madame de Barli's fortune?"

"She had none. Her father was an officer in the army, whose family had been ruined at the time of the Revolution; and, as I say, M. de Barli trusted this Lozares as he would have trusted his own brother, perhaps even more so. His interest was paid regularly, and evidently he asked no questions about the capital, until one fine day Lozares disappeared, and it turned out that he had put his friend's fortune and his own into the same purse, and either lost it or carried it off. In any case, everything was gone."

"How dreadful! How appalling!" said Madame Gerard.

"It is the kind of thing one can never get over," added Madame Mauvoisin.

"I can understand how terribly you must have felt it," replied Madame Gerard. "And poor Raoul, too!"

"Yes, indeed. Raoul was absolutely dazed

by it all; and of course it has entailed changes in their household, in their whole way of living, that are most painful to him. I insisted that he should keep his own horse, though they had to give up their carriage. It is only fair," she added, half to herself, "that he should not be the one to suffer most."

"They have no children, I think?" asked Madame Gerard.

"They had one, but it was very delicate and lived only a few weeks. We thought Lucienne would hardly get over it, but she did rally at last."

"Thank God for that! It would have been too dreadful for poor Raoul if he had lost all—everything—one may say, at one blow."

Madame Mauvoisin made no answer; but, seizing a fan, she held it up between her face and the fire, at the same time hiding her expression from her friend.

"She was such a charming girl," went on Madame Gerard. "I remember her so well at a ball that was given soon after their marriage. She was like a portrait by Titian, with that wonderful hair."

"Yes, she is pretty enough," replied Madame

Mauvoisin indifferently; "or rather she was pretty. She has changed greatly, and looks quite passée already."

"And what has happened to her poor parents?"

"They left Poitiers immediately. It would have been too painful for them to remain in a place where everyone knew them, where their ruin was the talk of the town. They are in Paris, I believe—living somewhere near the Luxembourg, Raoul told us."

"Then do you see nothing of them?" persisted Madame Gerard.

"No, certainly not. We could not be expected to forget the past; and the gulf that swallowed up all our hopes for Raoul lies between us. Even if M. de Barli had shown that he regretted what he had done we might have forgiven him; but he has been most high-handed in the whole matter, and he and my husband had a regular scene. Since then, of course, any intercourse has been impossible."

"What happens, then, if you meet them at your son's house?"

"We begged that Raoul should do as we have been obliged to do. It is painful cer-

tainly, but he has agreed not to see his wife's people. After all he has suffered through their fault, he can not be blamed for what he does."

"But surely his wife still sees her parents?"

"Yes, I believe she does. Raoul has not forbidden her to do so. He just shuts his eyes and asks no questions."

"Has nothing been done to punish the wretched thief?" said Madame Gerard.

"Everything has been done to try to find him," replied Madame Mauvoisin; "but, so far, not the slightest trace of him can be discovered. He wrote to M. de Barli from Modane, but that may have been merely a blind. He has been condemned to twelve years' penal servitude. That, however, is very little satisfaction to us; for he is far too cunning to be caught."

"What a wretch he must have been! How could M. de Barli let himself be so taken in?"

"About thirty years ago, I believe the Lozares lost money in safeguarding the De Barlis' interests. What they did was merely common honesty, but M. de Barli chose to look upon it as something heroic. In any case, it was the father's doing. The son has shown himself to be a very different kind of a man."

It was altogether a painful subject; and, having heard all that there was to tell, Madame Gerard was not sorry to turn the conversation into a more pleasant channel.

CHAPTER II

A MOTHER'S PRIDE

"Now tell me about your daughter, dear Madame Mauvoisin!" said the visitor. "I am sure that she at least has brought you nothing but happiness and consolation."

Madame Mauvoisin leaned back against the soft cushions of the divan, and the smile which the remembrance of her son's misfortunes had banished, reappeared upon her lips.

"You are right," she said: "Louise has been our great consolation. Her marriage was a joy to us all—nay, more: between ourselves, I own it was a triumph. Dear child! She is indeed a favourite of Fortune."

"I am not surprised at that," said Madame Gerard. "She was such a dear little creature, so bright and full of life."

"Perhaps I ought not to praise her," returned her mother, smiling; "but there is no denying

her talents. And marriage has improved her enormously. Since she has had a house of her own, she has become so dignified. Oh, you will find her quite a woman of the world!"

"I shall be delighted to see her," said Madame Gerard, "and to make acquaintance with the Baron de Charolles."

"He is well worth knowing. A wonderful man, my dear! Before he was thirty, he had made eight hundred thousand francs on the Stock Exchange. Since his marriage he must have at least trebled that amount. If he goes on as he is doing, he will rival the Rothschilds. Such a head for business! Such discrimination! You can see even in his photograph that he is no ordinary mortal."

The proud mother-in-law held out a portrait of the object of her praise, and Madame Gerard studied it with interest.

The Baron de Charolles was certainly an extraordinarily good-looking man. His high forehead and deep-set eyes showed great mental powers; but the lines round his mouth indicated a highly-strung nervous temperament; an impression intensified by the hands—one tightly clenched, the other hardly able to keep still

even before the camera. At first sight it was a picture to arouse admiration, yet in its very beauty there was something sinister. This latter was the impression that it left on Madame Gerard's mind. She was, however, too polite and too politic to express her real sentiments; but to the words of approval evidently expected from her she could not help adding that she thought he looked very serious and preoccupied.

"Yes, he is serious," replied his mother-in-law; "but he is perfectly charming, all the same. He is very fond of his wife; and as to his children, he is quite foolish about them. There are times when he is preoccupied and silent; but, with all he has on his mind, that is only natural. Luckily, his wife understands him thoroughly. They are a most devoted couple."

At that moment the sound of the door bell broke in upon Madame Mauvoisin's conversation with her friend, putting a stop to further confidences.

Without waiting to be announced, two newly arrived visitors ushered themselves into the room. They were about the same age; both were tall and slight, but here the resemblance

between them ceased. The foremost, fair and graceful, was too much like Madame Mauvoisin for her identity to remain in doubt. Was Madame de Charolles good-looking? Perhaps not, strictly speaking; although her youth and the way she wore her beautiful clothes might have given her a claim to be called pretty, had she not been completely overshadowed by the wonderful beauty of her companion.

Classical features, almost perfect in their regularity, with deep dark eyes, were shadowed by heavy masses of auburn hair—not the ordinary reddish colour that is so called, but the warm, ruddy tint so loved of artists. The skin was creamy white, and the lines of the sweet, delicate mouth showed that trouble had already clouded the sunshine of the young life. There was a further difference between the sisters-in-law. A fair-haired boy toddled at Madame de Charolles' side; and she was followed by a nurse in pretty peasant dress, carrying a placid-sleeping babe. But Lucienne was alone.

"Madame Gerard! In Paris! Can I really see aright?" Madame de Charolles went

quickly towards her old friend. "What a delightful surprise! It is so nice to see you again—"

"Louise dear," interrupted Madame Mauvoisin, "are you not tired after your night at the opera?"

"Not at all, thank you, Mother! No, I will not sit down just yet. I must show the children to Madame Gerard."

She turned toward the sleeping baby, and Madame Mauvoisin took the two-year-old boy in her arms.

"Here is the favorite, the spoiled boy!" she said laughingly. "Kiss grandmamma, darling!"

But the child, true to the character that his grandmother gave him, pushed aside her caresses impatiently, and struggled to get to the sweets upon the tea tables.

"Give him what he wants, nurse," said his grandmother, "or we shall not be able to hear ourselves speak. He is a young man who knows his own mind, I can assure you," she added to Madame Gerard. "He is accustomed to getting everything he wants."

Whilst this was going on, Lucienne was

standing rather apart from the animated little group. Madame Gérard, who knew her very slightly, had merely bowed to her when she came in; and her mother-in-law had only vouchsafed a curt "Good morning, Lucienne!" The conversation went on between the others, and nearly a quarter of an hour passed before she was able to say a word.

"I have a message for you from Raoul, Madame," she said at last. "He wished me to tell you how sorry he is not to be able to come to you to-day."

"Raoul not coming!" cried Madame Mauvoisin, "not coming on a day that he knows I am expecting him! And pray what reason can you give for such neglect?"

"M. de la Chenaie invited him this morning to Val-des-Bois. They are shooting there to-day. I do not expect him home until to-morrow."

"Ah, that makes all the difference!" said Madame Mauvoisin. "I knew he was to go one day to Val-des-Bois; in fact, I begged him myself to accept M. de la Chenaie's invitation." Then, turning to Madame Gerard, she went on: "It is a charming place and excellent

shooting. Raoul will have a most pleasant visit. Of course, the dear boy ought not to dream of giving up such pleasures for me. His life is dull enough—"

Madame Gerard could not resist stealing a glance at the young wife's face as her mother-in-law spoke; but there was no change to be seen upon it, beyond a slight colour which showed in the pale cheeks.

"He will come to-morrow and tell me all about it," went on Madame Mauvoisin. "Tell him, Lucienne, that I shall be expecting him. He had better come to lunch, so as to be sure to find his father at home."

"Very well, Madame, I will give him your message," answered Lucienne, coldly; but her mother-in-law paid no attention to her tone, though her own voice changed as she turned to her daughter. The dictatorial manner became soft and caressing as she laid her hand on Louise's arm.

"What have you been doing to-day, dear?" she asked.

"Frédéric had a bad headache this morning," replied Madame de Charolles, "so we went for a drive in the Bois."

On hearing this, Madame Mauvoisin was at once filled with anxiety on behalf of her son-n-law; but Louise reassured her, and they went on to speak of his work, each vying with the other in praising him to Madame Gerard. From what they said their visitor learned that the Mauvoisins were evidently counting on their son-in-law's genius for finance to recoup the losses that their son had sustained through the De Barli misfortunes.

Probably neither of them meant to be unkind to Lucienne. Louise, at least, forgot her presence as she extolled her husband's ability; but Madame Gerard thought she detected a tone of bitterness in her old friend's voice when she spoke of the Baron's successes, as though comparing them in her mind with the misfortunes that another financier had brought about.

Lucienne sat silent and apparently unmoved; but Madame Gerard guessed that her composure was assumed, and that even if her sister-in-law's thoughtlessness was excusable, her mother-in-law's hidden taunts must have goaded her almost past endurance.

The conversation had again changed, and Madame Mauvoisin was begging her daughter

to stay and dine with them, offering to send to M. de Charolles' office to tell him to join the party, when Lucienne rose from her seat. Madame Gerard had been watching her covertly, and she could not check a feeling of indignation against her old friend as she saw how purposely she ignored her daughter-in-law. Though outwardly courteous enough, she seemed to take a cruel pleasure in saying the things most likely to be painful.

"Dear Madame, you are not going already?" cried Madame de Charolles, seeing that Madame Gerard had also risen.

"You must not go!" said Madame Mauvoisin. "Why should you not stay to dinner also? We should just make up a charming little party."

"You are more than kind, but really I must go," said Madame Gerard, glancing now openly at Lucienne, who, although her mother-in-law knew she would be alone at home, received no invitation to stay.

"Wait one moment at least," urged Madame de Charolles. "I am just getting some Russian furs, and I want your advice about them. Oh, are you going, Lucienne?" she added carelessly,

holding out her hand. "Well, good-bye, then!"

"Good-bye, Lucienne!" said Madame Mauvoisin, coldly.

Madame Raoul would have merely bowed again to Madame Gerard, to whom she had not been introduced; but the elder woman's warm heart was touched, and she held out her hand, looking up kindly as she did so into the sad young face. Lucienne did not speak, but her lips contracted, as though to hide their quivering; and the fingers that she laid on her new friend's palm felt cold even through the glove that covered them.

She crossed the drawing-room slowly, and walked through the hall, with her head held proudly high. The footman came forward quickly to open the door for her. All the servants in her mother-in-law's house gave ready service to Madame Raoul; and even now, in her distress, she forced herself to smile her thanks to the man as she passed out. Just as he closed the door again, a ripple of childish laughter reached her ears; and then at last, standing alone on the dark staircase landing, her composure gave way.

"God help me!" she sobbed, leaning for a

moment against the wall; but steps below warned her not to linger; and, drawing down her veil, she hurried from the house.

CHAPTER III

THE DE BARLI HOME

'At the time of his marriage, Raoul de Mauvoisin wished to take a house in one of the wide avenues that run off the Champs Elysées. Lucienne, who was accustomed to the space and air of a provincial town, shrank from the idea of settling down in a narrow, noisy street; but Raoul's parents were so bent on having the young couple near them, that they gave up their project, though not without regret, and established themselves in the Rue Taitbout.

It did not, therefore, take Lucienne long to get home from the Rue Lafayette. Yet before reaching her own door she had quite regained her self-command. Going straight to her room, she took off the long satin coat which she had been wearing, and laid aside her feather-trimmed hat, donning in their place a cloak and toque almost severe in their simplicity. Then,

ringing for her maid, she told her that she was going out and would not return until after dinner.

Evening was closing in. It was past five o'clock, and a slight fog dimmed the gaslights which were already showing in the shop windows. The air was cold and damp, the streets were wet, and the continual traffic had made the pavements muddy and slippery.

Lucienne walked rapidly along, heeding neither hour nor weather, but after going a short distance her attention was caught by the contents of a shop window, before which a small group of people was gathered. It was a provision dealers; and several delicious-looking dishes, cooked and ready for use, were displayed in tempting array. Those who looked with longing eyes at the delicacies were not purchasers, and Lucienne had to force her way through them, which she did as gently as was possible. The dish which she chose to buy was less ornate than those which were shown in the window. It was a chicken pâtè, crusted with most excellent-looking pastry. The shopman offered to send her purchase, but she said she preferred to carry it herself; and when it was

wrapped in paper, she slipped it under the folds of her cloak.

A cutting wind met her as, leaving the shop, she turned toward the river, till, after crossing one of the bridges, she was sheltered in a long dark street, very unlike the quarter she had just left. Twenty minutes' walk found her amidst surroundings poorer and darker still. An old house in a narrow street off the Place Saint-Sulpice was her destination. A porter sat, as though on guard, in a tiny boxlike office under the archway leading to the courtyard, whence the stairs mounted to the apartments above. Recognizing Lucienne, he let her pass without comment; and she crossed quickly to the staircase and began to ascend the steep steps, which time and damp and the passage of many feet had stained and worn away. On the third floor she paused to take breath. Young as she was, she found the stairs very fatiguing; but her thoughts turned in anguish from herself to those—old and, oh, so dear!—who had to climb that same way daily.

Still another flight lay before her; but at last she reached the door she sought, and rang gently. With little delay it was opened to her,

and she saw a man standing before her in the dim light.

"Father, dear, it is I!" she said.

"What! Lucienne at this hour! We had given you up for to-day." And he kissed her tenderly.

"Raoul had to leave home, so I have come to spend the evening with you," explained Lucienne. "How is my mother to-night?"

"Her cough is very bad." M. de Barli dropped his voice and spoke sadly. "Go to her, dear, she is in the sitting-room."

Lucienne went forward as she was told, and opened the door of the sitting-room. There was no light in it, except what came from the dancing flames of a fire, whose tell-tale crackle revealed that it had only just been lit. The figure of a woman was silhouetted against the glow, which, feeble as it was, showed out the poor thin hands which vainly sought for warmth.

"Mother!" Lucienne sprang to Madame de Barli's side. "What is the matter? Are you very ill?"

"My darling, is that you?" It was a very worn and frail figure that Lucienne pressed in

her young arms. "No I am not ill. It is nothing. I am tired to-night, and have caught a little cold. But, dear, how late to come to us, and on so bad a night! It is raining: I feel your cloak is quite wet."

"I will take it off," replied Lucienne. "It is only damp from the fog, and there is plenty of time for it to dry. I am going to spend the evening with you."

"Why did you not send us word, dear, and I would have had dinner earlier for you?" said Madame de Barli.

"Send you word! Why, Mother, I thought you would welcome even a surprise visit!"

"You know the welcome that is always waiting for you here," she said. "Only if I had known that you were coming, our menu might have been less scanty."

"I thought of that, too," said Lucienne, playfully; and she produced the pâtè which had been lying in its paper on the table.

"That is all right, then," said M. de Barli, speaking in a stern tone, and not even looking at the appetizing dish. "We may as well dine at once. I do not want to be late," he added, addressing his wife.

"Late?" repeated Lucienne interrogatively. But her mother checked her with a quick gesture.

"Very well, dear. It will be ready in five minutes," Madame de Barli said, rising from her chair.

"Where are you going, Mother? Surely Manette is not out at this hour?"

"She—she is not in," began Madame de Barli; but her husband cut her short.

"Manette has left us," he said. "She wanted more wages."

"Prosper, let me explain!" remarked Madame de Barli, seeing how distressed her daughter looked.

"Lucienne is not blind," he replied dryly. "No explanations can get over the fact that we are alone here. She can see it for herself."

"But since when have you been without a servant?" asked Lucienne.

"Only a few days," replied Madame de Barli. "You must not blame her for having left us," she went on, seeing that Lucienne was about to speak. "Her father is old and she has to earn all she can for him."

"Ah," murmured Lucienne, "she is lucky!

She at least can work for her parents. Let me help you," she continued aloud. "Let me be your servant just for to-night."

"No, dear!" Her mother's tone admitted of no further discussion. "No. I prefer to do it myself. I know where everything is."

She left the room to make preparations for the simple meal, and Lucienne and her father were left alone together. One of the miserable consequences following on the misfortunes that had ruined the De Barlis was the existence of a growing barrier between the father and daughter. In his wife's presence, M. de Barli never spoke openly to Lucienne of her husband or his people; but on the few occasions when they had been alone together, he did not try to hide the resentment, the hatred that their conduct had aroused in him. Duty forbade that Lucienne should listen to abuse of the man who was her husband, who, in his own careless fashion, was kind to her, and whom, in spite of all, she loved. And, besides this, the unchristian feelings to which her father gave vent distressed her beyond measure, for his own sake.

No sooner had Madame de Barli left the room than he began in his usual vein; and, in

spite of Lucienne's protests, he went on, pacing the room as he spoke, and ending in a voice that trembled with rage and baffled hate.

"What would I not give to have them in my power!" he cried. "If only I could make them feel something of the sufferings that they have inflicted on me I should die content."

"Father, Father!" said Lucienne. "It is not right to speak like that."

"Right!" he retorted. "Is it right to prevent a daughter from receiving her parents in her own house? Is it right to add to the miseries of a miserable man? Is it right to be heartless, unjust?"

His voice died away, for there was a sound of steps in the corridor without.

"I know, dear, dear Father!—I know!" whispered Lucienne. "But nothing can make your wish for revenge anything but wrong."

At that moment the door opened.

"The dinner is ready," said Madame de Barli, and neither father nor daughter regretted that the conversation could not be prolonged.

Lucienne noted that the dining-room, as well as the sitting-room, bore signs of poverty, which

was made the more apparent in contrast with a few costly articles of furniture, evidently relics of happier days, that dotted the room here and there.

The meal itself was poor and scanty. The soup, though served from a massive silver tureen, was indifferent; and, had it not been for Lucienne's contribution to the meal, a dish of vegetables and a plate of dried fruit would have completed the menu. Madame de Barli ate little, but her husband took his share of the pâtè hungrily, almost greedily. As for Lucienne, every mouthful seemed as though it would choke her. She had known that her parents were poor, but never before had she realised that they were in absolute want. She could not bear to see her father eat; her mother's cough went through her like a knife. He had been hungry; she had been cold. Lucienne shivered at the thought of what she was powerless to remedy. In the past she had always told her mother when Raoul's absence was likely to leave her free, and much had therefore been hidden from her. To-night she saw her parents' existence in all its sordid nakedness.

Lucienne had other troubles apart from those of her parents. She was often lonely and neglected at home; for Raoul's mother was continually asking him to her house without including her in the invitation; and her friends, seeing this, did the same thing. This neglect and the covert insults to which she was subject had been kept secret in the past, and now Lucienne found that she had not been the only one to have recourse to concealment.

"What time is it?" asked her father, breaking in upon her gloomy thoughts.

She could not trust herself to speak, so held up her watch before him.

"Seven o'clock already! Then I have no time to spare. I shall be back in an hour. Will you still be here, child?"

"Yes, Father, I will remain with Mother until you come back."

He rose from the table, answering his wife shortly when she begged him to put on his overcoat; and Lucienne, to her astonishment, heard the door that led from the apartment on to the staircase open, and then quickly close again.

CHAPTER IV

THEIR DAUGHTER'S VISIT

"WHAT is it?" asked Lucienne. "Where has father gone at this time of night?"

"He is upset this evening, Lucienne dear, because—well, he has made up his mind to undertake a task that is most repugnant to him. M. Roger, who has a school close to this, has asked him to go in for an hour every evening to speak Spanish to some of the students. You understand how painful it is to him to do this."

"Poor father! Yes, indeed I do understand. Every word must bring before his mind the remembrance of Pedro Lozares."

"That is it. He has never ceased talking of him—ever since this arrangement was made."

"That makes it as bad for you as it is for him. Why did you let him do it, Mother? He should have refused."

"He thought it better, dear. After all, it

is only one more trial for us to take from the hands of God."

They had gone back to the sitting-room, and Lucienne put her arms about her mother.

"Poor, poor darling!" she said softly, stifling a sob, and leaning her face against the worn cheek, which she felt burning against her own. "Mother," she cried, affrighted, "you must be ill! Tell me! Don't hide anything more from me. I would much rather know the worst."

She spoke almost fiercely, as though any further sorrow would be intolerable to her. But her mother soothed her quickly.

"Really, dear, I am not ill. I had to go out in the cold to-day to see a girl the nuns recommended to replace Manette, and I must have caught a little chill; but it is nothing. I own that the state your poor father has been in all day has helped to worry me. There are times when it seems as though he *had* to talk of Lozares; and I cannot—no, I cannot—think of him as a Christian, so I try to put the remembrance of him from me altogether. I seem to see him enjoying his ill-gotten gains, whilst we are suffering for his faults; and—God forgive me!—I cannot pardon him."

"Don't think of him like that, Mother. Surely, wherever he is, he cannot be happy; for he must be tortured with remorse."

"Remorse! Lozares! Such men as he has proved himself to be don't know the meaning of the word remorse."

"Yet Judas, the worst of criminals, was capable of feeling it," said Lucienne, softly. "Besides, I am sure that God will not allow us to suffer for ever. Some day justice will be done."

"We have been waiting a long time for that day," sighed Madame de Barli. "O Lucienne, I am afraid I am becoming very wicked!"

"You are over-tired to-night, dear!" said Lucienne, soothingly. "Let me put you to bed just as I used to do sometimes in the happy days that are gone."

"No, no! I see you too seldom to miss a moment of your company," replied Madame de Barli. "It rests me just to sit with you like this."

Lucienne rearranged the cushions at her mother's head, then seated herself on a low stool beside her.

"You must not think, dear child," went on Madame de Barli, "that I often feel as wretched as I do to-night. Sometimes, sitting here, I am almost contented, thinking of you in your happy life; for you *are* happy, dear—are you not?"

For a moment Lucienne made no reply. Putting other things out of the question, how could she be happy, knowing how her parents were suffering? But Madame de Barli misinterpreted her silence.

"Tell me, Lucienne," she said peremptorily. "You must tell me if Raoul is unkind to you."

"No—oh, no!" cried Lucienne, eagerly. "Indeed I have nothing to reproach him with, except in one respect,"—and she pressed her mother's hand. "He never refuses me anything for myself; but he is weak, and he has always allowed himself to be guided too much by his mother."

"Weakness such as his might be called by a harder name, I am thinking," said Madame de Barli.

"No, Mother, you must not be too hard on Raoul. I know him so well, and I can see that he often regrets having to do as he is asked;

but he feels that he is—that we are—dependent on his parents."

"And cannot his mother see that she is making little of her son when she persuades him to act against his better instincts? O Lucienne, wherever I turn I find myself growing hard and unforgiving! There are times when I can hardly keep myself from wishing that the day may come when she will learn from experience what it is to be forbidden to cross the threshold of her own daughter's home."

"Mother darling, don't—don't say that!" cried Lucienne. "It would be far worse for her than for you. You have nothing to reproach yourself with; you have only sorrow to bear, whilst she would also have remorse and humiliation."

"I could forgive her as far as we are concerned," said Madame de Barli, "if I thought that she was good to you."

"She is always very—polite," faltered Lucienne.

"Nothing more than polite to her own daughter-in-law?"

"I did not mean to complain, Mother."

"No; you merely mean to be just," replied

her mother. "I know how they treat you, darling! A mother-in-law who cannot forgive your loss of fortune, and a sister-in-law who cannot forget your beautiful face—"

"Dearest," interposed Lucienne, "you imagine things. When I married, Louise was only a young girl; perhaps she was a little jealous of the notice that was given to me as a bride; but now—"

"But now she has not changed," replied Madame de Barli.

"How can you tell that?" said Lucienne.

"I saw her a few days ago," answered Madame de Barli. "We came face to face in a shop, and she is prouder and more arrogant than ever."

The colour flooded Lucienne's cheeks.

"Did she speak to you?" she murmured.

"Speak to me!" Madame de Barli gave a short laugh. "My dear, she cut me in the most pointed manner." Then, changing her tone, she added: "My dearest, all this talking does no good. I can only pray for a more forgiving spirit. In the meantime will you light the lamp? There is some mending that I must get through this evening for your father."

Madame de Barli's workbasket stood in an angle near the window, and, after setting the lamp upon the table, Lucienne went over to fetch her mother's work from it. The first thing that she drew from the recesses of the basket was nothing that needed mending. It was a square of canvas with a design of flowers drawn out upon it. Diving again into the basket, her finger came in contact with a roll of silken skeins, which she held up.

"Mother," she cried, "what is this?"

A look of annoyance crossed Madame de Barli's features when she saw what her daughter had found.

"That is not what I want," she said, ignoring the question. "Put it down, and bring me those socks."

"You will not answer me," remarked Lucienne, sadly; "but I understand, all the same. You are doing work for some shop!"

"And why not?" returned Madame de Barli, in a tone she vainly tried to make indifferent. "I am well paid for it."

"Well paid—for fancywork!" cried Lucienne. "Oh, Mother, Mother! And to think that you are brought to this!"

She could no longer restrain her tears, and for a few moments mother and daughter wept unrestrainedly together.

"I want you to tell me the whole, whole truth," said Lucienne, when at last she regained her composure. "Some new misfortune must have happened that has been kept from me. I can bear anything except being made a stranger of by you."

"Nothing has happened, dear, I assure you," replied her mother,—"nothing, at least but this. Our landlord has raised the rent of these rooms. Poor as they are, they suit us; we have grown used to them, and your father would miss the Luxembourg Gardens if we had to leave the neighbourhood. Indeed I have not the strength nor the energy to make a move, and so we have decided to try to pay the extra rent."

"How much is it?" asked Lucienne.

"Two hundred francs—less than I would have paid for a hat in the olden days."

"Mother," said Lucienne quickly and firmly, "you must let me pay this sum for you. Raoul is generous to me. He gives me plenty of money, and never asks me how it is spent."

Lucienne, forseeing a refusal, went on:

"Don't refuse me, Mother! You asked me just now if my life was happy. How can it be when you treat me like this? Don't make me hate it more than I do already."

"You know, Lucienne, you are asking an impossibility," replied her mother, coldly. "We would far rather beg our bread in the streets than accept your husband's money in charity."

"But, Mother, in his heart I am certain that he would wish it."

"That makes no difference. When he asks to help us, you can tell him that some day he may pay for a pauper's grave for us; but as long as we have a voice to refuse his charity we will do so."

Lucienne could not answer. Her mother's words were cruel, but her tone was final and admitted of no discussion. Sick at heart, she began mechanically to fold up the canvas, when a label sewn to one corner caught her attention, and she paused for an instant to examine it. "To be returned at latest December 23," it ran.

"When must this cushion be finished, Mother?" she asked abruptly.

"Leave it alone, Lucienne," replied her

mother. "Surely enough has been said about it."

For a moment Lucienne paused, undecided; then, taking a piece of paper, she rolled the work in it, and laid the parcel with her cloak upon the sofa.

"What are you doing?" asked her mother.

"The only thing that I can do to help you," said Lucienne. "You are not fit to toil over any kind of work; and, though you will not take my husband's money, you cannot refuse what I earn myself."

"But, Lucienne, what will Raoul say?"

"I can manage that," replied Lucienne.

And as she spoke her father's step was heard outside. His evening's work had served only to deepen the cloud upon his brow; and he approached the fire moodily, refusing his wife's offer of a seat.

"I think," said Lucienne, "that I had better be going."

"Come, then," answered her father. "I will take you down to the Place Saint-Sulpice and see you into a carriage."

Lucienne rose at once and put on her cloak. When coming in, its folds had served to hide

a parcel. So now they did the same; and Madame de Barli's tremulous "good-bye" expressed the thanks that she did not dare to speak.

Lucienne's maid was waiting up for her mistress, but she was not kept long in attendance upon her. Once alone, Lucienne wrapped herself in a warm dressing-gown, then threw herself on her knees and prayed long and fervently. When her devotions were concluded she did not go to bed. Passing into the drawing-room, she relit one of the lamps that the servants had put out, and drew a chair close beside it.

Outside, the carriages passed up and down the street, the lights of their lamps mingling with those that shone in other windows. But gradually the noises lessened; one by one the lights died out; the great city became silent and dark for a few short hours; then the traffic began again. The chill light of a winter's dawn came to drown the flickering lights that still burned dimly on the lamp-posts, but through it all the light in Lucienne's drawing-room kept bright. She had hardly stirred during all those long hours; only her fingers moved unceas-

ingly, and now and again the head of the bent figure was turned aside. The silks with which the lonely watcher embroidered were delicate and fine, and if a tear had fallen upon them it might have tarnished their lustre.

CHAPTER V

RAOUL'S DEPENDENCE

RAOUL MAUVOISIN had promised to return early from his visit to the country, and by ten o'clock everything was ready for him in the cosy, little apartment which ought to have been such a happy home. Lucienne had bathed her eyes, and dressed herself with even greater care than usual, so as to hide all traces of her night's vigil. The canvas work that had occupied her for so many hours was hidden away; but, even so, her fingers were not idle. As she waited for her husband she was making a dress for a poor child, and all the while her mind was busy with a plan for helping a struggling artist in whom she had succeeded in interesting Raoul. They had paid a visit to his studio together, and Lucienne had hoped that this might rouse her husband's interest, and that works of charity might come to be a bond between them.

She was deeply engrossed in such castles in the air as these when a sharp knock at the door announced the return of the master of the house. Throwing down her work, Lucienne ran out to meet him.

"Brr! I am cold!" he cried, swinging his arms together. "The heating apparatus in the train was out of order, and by bad luck I just hit on a cab without a hot water tin."

"Come in quickly, then," said Lucienne. "There is a good fire in the sitting-room."

She pulled a low chair to the hearth, and Raoul threw himself into it.

"That's better," he said. "I was half frozen. Why, I don't believe I've even said good-morning to you!" he went on, and he put his arm caressingly round his wife's shoulder.

"I hope you enjoyed yourself," said Lucienne. "Tell me what you did."

"It was not enjoyable," replied Raoul, drawing to him the bowl of violets that had been bought for his special delectation, and burying his face in their sweetness. "La Chênaie is not a bad fellow, but one soon has enough of him."

"Was there no one else there?" asked Lucienne.

"Not a soul, worse luck! I had to bear the brunt of his conversation, and he is a talker if ever there was one."

"And you had to listen all day, poor you!" returned Lucienne, laughing.

"Poor me indeed! I had to listen all day and half the night. And to such talk!"

"Well, I hope the shooting made up for it?"

"Not in the least, I assure you. We did not see more than two hares, and they were at such a distance that even La Chênaie, good shot as he is, could not touch them. Eventually, I shot a brace of partridges; and, after walking goodness knows how many miles, we got home, frozen and exhausted, coated with mud to our eyes. And you, Lucienne—what did you do with yourself?"

"I went to your mother's 'At Home,' as we arranged, and then I dined with my own parents."

A look of annoyance came over Raoul's face.

"I hope they are well," he said formally, speaking with an effort.

Lucienne shook her head.

"My mother has a bad cough, and my father was not looking well either."

Raoul made no further comment, but began fidgeting with the burning logs.

"By the way," said Lucienne after a moment's silence, "your mother told me to tell you that she would expect you to lunch to-day."

"Does she expect me to turn out again when I have only just got home? That's rather too much," remarked Raoul, impatiently. "What did you say to her?"

"I said I would give you the message. You can do exactly as you choose about going or not."

"I'd much rather not."

"Then don't go. I am delighted that you are going to stay with me for once. I will send Julien to let your mother know. Shall I tell him to say that we shall go and see her to-night?"

"Yes, to-night will be much better."

Lucienne rang the bell; but when the footman answered it, instead of giving the message, Raoul told him to go away and to come back in five minutes.

"After all, I think it would be better to write a line," he said to his wife. "My mother might not like a verbal message."

"That's true," she replied. "A note would be more considerate."

Rising, Lucienne collected writing materials and laid them before Raoul. He took up the pen and dipped it into the ink; but, instead of beginning to write, he held it undecidedly over the paper.

"I say, Lucienne," he exclaimed after a moment's hesitation, "as my mother spoke to you, don't you think you ought to send the answer? Yes, I am sure it would be better for you to write than for me."

An ironical smile played for a moment round Lucienne's lips.

"Do you think it matters much who writes?" she said. "Can't you say, 'My dear Mother, I have only just returned home, and shall therefore go and pay you my respects this evening instead of at lunch time, as you so kindly suggest. I write this line to remind you that, although at a distance, my heart is always with you'?"

"How very clever you are!" said Raoul, admiringly. "I should never have hit on so pretty a way of putting things."

"That is all very well," she answered; "but

I should like to know when you are ever at a loss for a pretty speech?"

"Often indeed," Raoul assured her, laughingly. "But honestly, Lucienne, I wish you would write this note yourself."

"You are very unreasonable," said Lucienne, taking up the pen unwillingly. "The truth is that I spoil you."

"You are a treasure, a jewel!"

She could not resist his coaxing; and when the footman returned she handed him the note that she herself had written.

Raoul had risen from his seat, and was standing with his back to the mantelpiece.

"Then my mother was not annoyed when she heard that I was not going to her 'At Home'?" he questioned.

"No, not when she heard where you had gone instead."

"Had she many people?"

"Not whilst I was there. No one came in before I left except Louise and a Madame Gerard."

"Madame Gerard," repeated Raoul—"the old lady who has been at Moscow?"

"She is not very old," said Lucienne, "but

she is probably the one you mean, for I heard them talking about Russia."

"Sure to be the one, then. A hideous old thing, like a bat."

"Raoul, you are too bad! She is not as ugly as all that, and she seemed to be so kind."

"The kindest creature in the world. She and I used to be great friends. Let us go and see her this afternoon."

"That would be nice," answered Lucienne.

Suddenly Raoul stooped and looked at his wife.

"Aren't you very pale?" he asked, turning her face toward him. "What's wrong, dear? You are not ill, are you?"

"Not in the least, thank you!" replied Lucienne, flushing slightly. "It is nothing. The weather has been trying lately, and I am rather tired. That is all."

"I say, Lucienne," he resumed, "as we are going to Madame Gerard's, we might as well pay some other visits, too."

Raoul took a pencil from his pocket and jotted down some names on the back of an old letter. All at once he paused, and began toying with the pencil as though he had sud-

denly remembered something disagreeable. Lucienne, who had taken up her sewing again, did not notice the change that had come over him, until he murmured his thoughts half aloud.

"Well?" she asked, inquiringly. "Is there anything wrong?"

"No, only—look here, Lucienne! What do you think my mother will say when she hears that I have been paying visits after refusing her invitation?"

"Surely she could not object when we are going to her this evening."

"But that is just what I am afraid she will do."

"I think you make her out too exacting."

"My dear, I know what she is, and I don't want to do anything to annoy her."

"Then let us put off the visits until to-morrow."

"I am engaged for to-morrow. If only your note had not gone!"

"But it has gone; it went half an hour ago."

Raoul said nothing more; and, although Lucienne knew what he was hoping for, she also kept silence.

"What would you say to my going to lunch, all the same?" he suggested at last; but his tone showed that he was ashamed of his own suggestion.

Still Lucienne was silent.

"It is the only way that I can see to get out of it," he went on.

"It would have been more considerate if you had made up your mind sooner what you wanted to do," said Lucienne in a low voice.

"I wish to goodness I had," replied Raoul. "It is most annoying."

Again there was a pause.

"Anyhow, I must decide now. It is nearly time to start, if I do go. Can't you advise me, Lucienne, dear?"

"Surely you can decide such a little thing for yourself." She could not keep a touch of contempt from her voice, and Raoul heard and felt it.

"Very well, then; I suppose I'd better go," he said. "But I shall stay only a short time. Will you be ready to start by three o'clock, if I come for you then?"

"Quite ready," replied Lucienne, "at whatever time you wish."

"Then let us say half-past two."

"I shall be ready."

He laid his hand apologetically upon her shoulder.

When he had left her, Lucienne sat white and silent.

"How can I mind such pin-pricks as this," she murmured at length, "after the real wounds that I have had to bear?"

She sighed deeply. Then, putting away the poor clothes she had been sewing, she took out the canvas work and settled down to embroider at it again.

By half-past two she was dressed and ready for her husband's return. Whilst she waited, she read again a letter that had just come for her. Only a few lines from her mother, telling her that a night's rest had worked wonders for the old couple, and that the present and the future seemed brighter and more hopeful when looked upon by morning light; she begged Lucienne to forget what she had seen and heard the previous night.

Such brave and loving words could not fail to comfort the devoted daughter; but even as she read them another note was taken to her,

bringing with it a very different message. Lucienne recognised the dainty, scented paper, and with no pleasurable feelings broke the seal. It ran:—

"My dear Lucienne,—M. de Charolles has promised to introduce Raoul to a friend of his at four o'clock to-day, so I write this line to tell you that he cannot accompany you on the visits you wish to pay this afternoon. I told him that I would let you know this, as it seems that the correspondence between our two households rests with us. Do not imagine, however, that Raoul will think better of this decision, as he had the good sense to do when you thought fit to refuse my invitation for him this morning.—Your mother,

"THERESE MAUVOISIN."

Lucienne rolled the note into a little ball and threw it into the fire. She was very pale, and her lips were folded tightly. For a moment she sat with closed eyes, as though offering this new humiliation to God, who allowed it to come upon her. A photograph of Raoul stood upon an easel close beside her. He had given it to her when they were first engaged, telling her

to keep it near her until the original should have the right never to leave her. The original had the right now to stay with her, but how seldom he availed himself of it!

She went quietly to her room, and, taking off the beautiful clothes that she had donned to please her husband, she told her maid to give her the plain gown and the cloak and hat she had worn on the previous night.

CHAPTER VI

THE OUTCASTS

In the early education of Lucienne de Barli, the teachings of religion had not been neglected. Her parents were not what in France are called "dévotes," but they had their daughter properly instructed, and from her childhood she had been aware that the first of all duties is to God. It was not, however, until after her marriage that the fullest consolations of religion were brought home to her. Her baby was born a few months after the catastrophe which ruined the happiness of so many lives, and for many weeks it seemed uncertain whether she herself would succeed in struggling back from the valley of death, weighted down as she was by the triple loss of her child, of her fortune, and one might almost say of her parents. Even when youth asserted itself, and her life was pronounced out of danger, there

were many days of weakness and weariness, which even her husband's attentions failed to shorten. Flowers, fruit, the latest books—everything that he could think of was taken to the sick room; but though, to please him, she tried to listen when he read the newest novel or the most exciting story of a current magazine, nothing really roused her interest.

One day he gave a parcel of books to one of the maids who did not usually wait on her mistress, and bade her take them to Madame's room. The girl, who had been only a few days in the house, fulfilled her errand shyly. Whilst she unfastened the parcel and laid the books within reach of the invalid, she could not help casting looks of pity on the weary, white face.

"Madame will enjoy reading these nice books," she said timidly.

Lucienne smiled faintly.

"I am tired of reading," she answered. "They never seem to have anything interesting at the library." And she turned over the new selection listlessly.

The girl looked at her in surprise.

"When I was with the Marquise de Vigne-·olles she used to get a number of very beautiful

books from the Faubourg Library," she said, still shyly. "Sometimes she used to suffer great pain, and then when I read to her she said it made her forget her suffering."

"What kind of books did you read?" asked Lucienne.

The girl was so earnest that, in spite of herself, her mistress was interested in what she was saying. She mentioned several works, and Lucienne bade her see if they were to be had at the library whose catalogue lay on the table. There were novels galore, a small selection of travels and biographies, and such like books; but Madame de Vignerolles' taste had evidently been of a different kind, for none of her favourites were to be found.

"If Madame would allow me," began the maid eagerly, "I can get her a catalogue from the Faubourg Library. Madame la Marquise used often to send me to change her books."

"Never mind, thank you!" replied Lucienne. "I dare say that one of those Monsieur has chosen for me will do very well."

The girl felt herself dismissed. But the following day, happening to pass the library, she bought a catalogue with her own money,

and waited for an opportunity to give it to her mistress. Lucienne, who had forgotten all about the incident, was surprised when, a few days later, the girl offered her the catalogue; and, more for the sake of not hurting her feelings than from any desire to read the books, she marked the titles of a few, and told the maid she might get them for her.

It so chanced—or, rather, Providence ordained—that the chosen books were out, and two others were sent in their places. One of these Lucienne had never heard of, and there was no author's name upon its title-page; only a motto, a single line, but Lucienne's attention was caught by it: "What doth a man know who hath not suffered?" The reading of this anonymous little work was a turning-point in Lucienne's whole existence. The book told of the anguish and desolation of a soul who, after years of agony, had found the only consolation that the world holds. "Come to Me all you that labour and are burdened," says Our Lord, "and you shall find rest." The unknown soul had sought and found. Lucienne learned from her to look at least to the light.

Other books followed the first one—some

purely spiritual, others telling of the life and works of saints and holy people—and from them Lucienne learned that to serve the poor was not only the duty but also the privilege of the rich. She could not escape the crosses that were laid on her shoulders; but, in trying to ease the crosses of others, she forgot at times the weight of her own.

She had begun, even before her strength had come back to her, to work for the poor, and lately she had taken to visiting them in their own homes. On the afternoon that Raoul, at his mother's instigation, had refused to accompany her on the round of visits that he himself had proposed to pay, Lucienne determined to go to see some of the poor people in whose lives she had learned to take so deep an interest.

The pale rays of a winter's sun were lighting the street as she went out, and the feeling of freshness and freedom did her good after the trying morning that she had passed. After walking some distance, she called a cab and bade the driver take her to the Rue de Temple, where she dismissed him, and threaded her way on foot through the narrow and intricate streets of the district. It was a miserable quarter.

Openings off the streets led to alleys that were narrower still. Lucienne turned up one of these that crept in between two shops and was so dark that she was obliged to feel her way along. Soon she came to a broken staircase, flight after flight of which she climbed, till at last she reached, six stories from the ground, a landing off which two doors opened. One of these led into an attic, the other into a loft, which was used as a store-room.

Lucienne knocked at the former, and was immediately bidden to enter. The attic was, like many of its kind, poor and bare; but it was at least light and airy, having large windows that looked out over the roofs of the neighbouring houses. A woman was seated, propped up with cushions, in an armchair near a table. She was a widow whom Lucienne had befriended at the time of her husband's death. For a while she had been able to support herself and her two children by sewing; but lately her health had given way, and, had it not been for the charity of her benefactress, she would have died from hunger and neglect. The armchair and its cushions, the stove and fuel, the nourishment needed to bring back the poor

woman's health, had all been provided by Lucienne; but the invalid was hardly more thankful for the material aid than she was for the sympathy with which her visitor listened when she spoke of her husband and the happy little home that had been theirs for ten years.

Lucienne had been listening for some time to the poor widow's account of her troubles, when she suddenly became aware of a noise that came apparently from the landing without.

"What is that?" she asked. "Does someone want to come in?"

"Oh, no, Madame!" replied the widow. "We have a new neighbour on the landing, I am sorry to say; and he coughs like that all day long and half the night as well."

"But that is not coughing," observed Lucienne, as the muffled sound of words came to her through the wooden partition.

"He is always going on like that," said the widow. "If he is not coughing he is grumbling or calling out for something. The porter comes up now and again to see to him, but he is never satisfied. I can't think how the landlord can let him stay there; he ought to be in a hospital."

"Poor creature!" said Lucienne, pityingly. "How dreadful for him to be alone, if he is ill!"

Later, when she bade her protegée good-bye, she stood for a moment on the landing, wondering where it could be that the sick man lay.

On each side of the attic, where the roof of the house sloped down to the eaves, there were two holes, little more than cupboards, and the groans apparently came from one of these. Lucienne had to peer here and there before she could make out the door. It stood flush with the woodwork, but it was so old and dilapidated that the interior of the hole was partly visible from the outside—at least to eyes that had grown accustomed to the darkness. A single pane of glass, forming a skylight amongst the rafters, showed that the place was bare of all furniture; but the outline of a human form was silhouetted, lying on a heap of dirty straw.

The man lay with his back towards the door; but even had he looked in her direction he could not have seen Madame Mauvoisin in the dim light. One of his legs seemed to be doubled under him, the other was stretched out straight

and motionless. It was evident that he could not move it without pain; and the overpowering atmosphere of the garret told that mortification had set in. His head moved restlessly from side to side; and all the time he kept raising his hands, stretching them out, then wringing them as though in great distress, whilst stifled cries for water were ever on his lips.

There was something here worse than mere poverty or even than suffering. Lucienne could not help shuddering as she turned again to the widow's attic, and reopened the door.

"The man next door keeps begging for something to drink," she said. "May I borrow a glass from you and a drop of water to take to him?"

"Madame must not go in there!" cried the woman, starting from her chair.

"No, no!" said Lucienne. "You are ill. I will take it myself. But to please you I will leave the door open, so you can see for yourself that he does me no harm."

With this the woman, who was herself hardly able to stand, had to be content; and Lucienne passed out again on to the landing, carrying the glass. There were no fastenings

to the garret door, and she gently pushed it open. Stepping inside, with head bowed to escape the rafters, she said softly:

"Here is something for you to drink."

With a startled movement the man turned on his side.

"Who is there?" he asked quickly.

But Lucienne made no answer. A cry of horror escaped her lips. The glass fell from her hand, and broke on the floor. She staggered back, stretched out her arms, groping blindly for support; and, finding none, she fell heavily forward on her knees.

The sick man had started upright, but his broken leg prevented his making any further movement.

"What is the matter?" he panted. "Who are you?"

She raised her face from between her hands, and for an instant their eyes met. There was horror, loathing, in hers; but in his—amazement, the most awful terror, and despair.

"Lucienne!"

She felt more than heard the whisper of her name. Then all was silence in the garret.

CHAPTER VII

THE ANGEL OF MERCY

It was the man who first broke silence.

"It's come at last! I'm done for, after all; for I cannot get away."

"What do you mean?" asked Lucienne; and, although her voice sounded far away in her own ears, the effort of speaking brought her gradually to herself. Holding to the wall for support, she drew herself to her feet.

What a sight was before her! There he lay, dragged down by his own act to the lowest degree of misery and destitution; bound to the wretched heap of straw that he called a bed; longing for a drop of water to assuage the burning thirst that tortured him. At her mercy, at her very feet, was he who, for his own selfish enjoyments, had sacrificed his friends, his honour, his very soul—he, the criminal, the thief, for whom search had been made

in every country of Europe, who had baffled the skill of the greatest detectives—he, Pedro Lozares!

His agony at being discovered was so intense that, even in her own agitation, Lucienne saw and noticed it.

"Hush, hush!" she cried at last. "You need not be afraid of me. I will not expose you."

Lozares turned upon her a face ghastly white from fear and anguish.

"Do you mean it? But no, you cannot mean to spare me! Why should you?"

"Why should I seek to have you punished by men," she said, "when I see the state you have come to through the justice of God?"

His head fell upon his breast and he was silent, bowed with shame before her.

Lucienne dragged herself to the door; but on gaining the landing she suddenly remembered the errand which had taken her to that accursed bedside. She had gone to relieve the sufferings of a fellow-being, and she could not go away and leave her task undone. The mug that the sick man had pushed away from him had rolled to where she stood; and, picking it up, she carried it to the attic next door.

The widow was frightened and distressed at the change that had come over her benefactress; but Lucienne explained away her pallor, saying she found the sick man was a person she had known before, and in her surprise at seeing him she had dropped and broken the glass. Now she sought only to refill the man's own mug; and, having done this, she left the room again.

Lozares could hardly believe his eyes when, a moment later, he saw Lucienne returning. Then for an instant he forgot everything in the overpowering craving for the water she had brought. He seized the mug, and swallowed its contents greedily in one long gulp. Lucienne did not wait to see him finish it. Without casting another look upon him, she moved to the door; but in the passage she could not help hearing the words he murmured to himself, yet half aloud.

"Poor child!" he said. "Is it possible that it is from your hand that I have received such a return for the past?"

Once in the street, Lucienne thought she would soon regain her self-command. But the struggle she had gone through was too severe; and, in spite of the fresh air playing on her

face, she felt as though everything were turning round, and her knees were trembling under her. No vehicle of any kind was in sight; and as soon as she reached a clean-looking shop she went in and asked if she might sit down whilst someone called a cab. A few minutes later found her rolling homewards along the streets that she had walked down with such very different feelings only a short time before.

Raoul had been at home for over an hour when his wife returned. He was waiting impatiently for her, but the sight of her pale face and wearied air made him forget the momentary annoyance that her absence had occasioned.

"What is the matter?" he inquired quickly. "What has happened to you?"

"I have such a bad headache!" she answered, truthfully enough.

Her husband frowned. In his heart he reproached himself for his behaviour of the morning, and he thought it was wiser to ask no questions as to the cause of his wife's indisposition.

"I wish you could get stronger," he said. "The least thing seems to upset you."

Lucienne did not answer, but she pressed his arm lightly.

"Stay with me for a little while this evening," she said. "That will do me more good than anything."

"An easy remedy," said Raoul, bending to kiss her pale cheek. "Let us have dinner now, and I will read to you afterwards until you feel inclined to go to sleep; then I'll look into the club for a bit."

"Thank you!" said Lucienne. It was very seldom that she asked a favour from her husband, but she felt to-night that she could not bear to be left alone.

Raoul picked out all the most interesting things that he could find in the paper; but, although the sound of his voice soothed her, she could not bring her mind to follow what he read. The figure of a man was before her eyes as plainly as though she really saw him—a wretched, haggard, awful figure, that kept staring at her in horror and despair.

Lucienne was tired out when at last she went to bed, but even then she could not sleep. The misery of those days, now five years past, came back to her. She seemed to suffer over

again the anguish that had struck her then. She heard the words that had told her of the catastrophe. She saw Raoul, white to the lips, pacing the room like a wild beast in a cage. She saw Monsieur and Madame Mauvoisin, and heard the words they flung at her. She saw her own parents ruined, penniless. She seemed to hold in her arms the lifeless body of the child that for one short hour had been hers.

All the sorrows that the cowardly, treacherous erstwhile friend had brought upon her called for judgment against him. Yet this man, her worst enemy, was ill—perhaps dying. He was alone, abandoned in his dire need even by his boon companions. He had come to the lowest depths of poverty and destitution, and he was suffering torture. It was not chance that had thrown him across Lucienne's path. Surely God Himself had directed her steps to that house out of all the many thousands wherein the poor of Paris dwell. Perhaps God intended her to save his life; perhaps the fate of his immortal soul lay in her hands. At these thoughts Lucienne shuddered. She had promised not to give him up to justice, but more than that she could not bring herself to

do. Vainly she tried to put the thought of his suffering from her; vainly she tried to pray.

"O my God," she cried at last, "have pity on me!" and she raised her crucifix to her lips. "I wish to do what is right. Teach me how Thou didst pardon Thy murderers. Help me to pardon my enemy."

Tears would have been a relief, but her eyes were dry, her lips parched and burning. Gradually, merciful sleep crept over her; the struggle with herself was at an end; her heart was at peace. But even as she slept the voice of Lozares sounded in her ears, and the words he used were the same as those used by another —by One who forgave far more than Lucienne was called upon to forgive: "I thirst!"

When morning came, Lucienne foresaw a difficulty that she had overlooked up to this. It did not seem right to keep her discovery a secret from her husband; but, on the other hand, she feared for several reasons to tell him all. She had given her word that no punishment should come upon Lozares as a consequence of her visit. Would Raoul feel bound to respect this promise? And even if she could persuade him not to seek directly for

vengeance, could she trust him to keep so important a secret? No; he was no more capable of keeping Lucienne's secret than he was of understanding the struggle she had gone through or the sacrifice she had decided to make. She did not like to act in so important a matter without her husband's sanction, and yet it was not possible to ask for it. Fortunately, she had his consent to visit the poor, and with that she must be satisfied.

Four days passed before she felt able to carry out her resolutions. She had by that time got over, to some extent, the physical shock that her discovery had caused; and, taking advantage of Raoul's absence, she went out early so as to hear Mass and receive Holy Communion in the Church of Notre-Dame des Victoires. Thus strengthened, she set out on her mission of charity. Now that she had decided what to do, she did not hesitate; but she could not control the feeling of repugnance and of fear that came over her, and her knees were trembling as she mounted the steep staircase of the tenement house.

Lozares lay in the same place. It seemed as though he had not moved since she last saw

him, only there were signs that his leg had become worse in the few days that had passed. Lucienne entered the garret noiselessly, and stood for a moment gazing down with irrepressible feelings of disgust on what had once been a prosperous, happy, self-respecting, and respected member of society. Could she bring herself to go forward, to touch him, to minister to him? Great drops of perspiration stood out upon her forehead. She wrung her hands together and felt as though she was suffocating.

"Pedro!"

The sick man turned quickly round, and his eyes fell on Lucienne as she stood under the skylight.

"You have come back—you!" he cried hoarsely. "What has brought you here again?"

"I have come," she said in a low voice, "to tell you that one at least of those you injured so cruelly has forgiven you."

He gazed at her for a moment as though her words conveyed no meaning to him. Then all at once he burst into tears. During her first visit, his bodily sufferings and the misery of his surroundings had failed to excite Lucienne's pity; for she could look upon them only as a

just return for the past. Now, however, his agony of remorse touched her heart.

"O Pedro, Pedro, how your crime has found you out!"

He threw up his hands in despair.

"You and yours have been well avenged."

"Do not speak of vengeance," answered Lucienne. "We—I have forgiven you."

She had brought a bottle of wine and some other things, which she proceeded to lay beside him on the floor. He watched her every movement; but he could not speak, for his voice was choked with tears. A cursory glance at the injured limb showed plainly that medical skill was needed.

"Have you seen a doctor?" she asked.

The sick man shook his head.

"It is useless," he said. "He could do nothing for me. I am too far gone. Besides, I don't want to live. What is there left for me to live for? Tell me," he went on, "tell me about your parents. Are they alive, or have I their deaths to account for as well as everything else?"

"No, no, thank God! They are alive."

"Do they know?"

"No; I have told no one that I found you."

He gave a deep sigh of relief, and looked up at the girlish figure beside him. A ray of sunshine fell through the skylight, turning Lucienne's hair into a golden aureole. Her face was pale from the trouble of mind she had so lately gone through, but the victory she had gained over herself had left an expression of indescribable peace and purity on her features. She looked like an angel of mercy come down from heaven to visit the haunts of shame and sorrow.

Lozares threw himself back on his bed, striking his brow with his hands.

"What a wretch, what a miserable wretch I have been!" he cried in anguish.

Lucienne knelt down beside him.

"Hush, Pedro!—hush!" she said. "You are exhausting yourself. It is God who has sent me to you—you must do as I tell you. Listen to me now. I am going to fetch a doctor to you."

She moved as though about to get up from her knees; but, without the slightest warning, Lozares threw himself upon her. She felt her arm seized and held as though in a vise, and,

despite herself, she was dragged down across the bed of straw. His gasping breath was in her ear. She saw his free hand tearing at his chest, his eyes started from his head, and his features were moved in violent contortions.

Lucienne was terrified at the sight of such a paroxysm. She struggled vainly to free herself from his grasp; and, failing to do so, she called aloud for help. The widow had spoken of her intention of leaving the garret, and it was evident that she had carried out her intention. All was silence except when Lozares groaned and gasped for breath, and Lucienne thought that he was dying. Even so, his grasp upon her did not lessen, and she was powerless to help him.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ABSCONDER'S RESCUE

It seemed to Lucienne that she had been kneeling in the invalid's grasp for an hour, but in reality only a few moments had elapsed before the force of the attack began to lessen. Lozares' features relaxed, his breath came more easily, and Lucienne was able to rise from her cramped position.

"Don't go!" the sick man murmured, in so weak a voice that his words were scarcely audible. "I am better now. It is passing away for this time."

"What was it?" asked Lucienne, still affrighted.

"I don't know. I have had several such attacks. Last night I thought I should surely die in one of them."

"Die!" repeated Lucienne. "O Pedro, are you ready to die—to appear before the judgment-seat of God?"

Shudderingly he shook his head.

"I must go and fetch a doctor," she said. "Let me also bring a priest to you."

He tried to speak, but a fresh attack of breathlessness came upon him.

"A priest—first!"

She could hardly hear the words; but, guessing at them, she repeated them; and Lozares nodded that she had heard aright. She was afraid to leave him, but still more was she afraid to let him die in his sins; and as soon as the attack began to subside she started on her errand.

In the parish churches in Paris it is the custom for one of the priests to be always within call in case of need, and Lucienne, driving as fast as a cab could take her, was able in a few minutes to deliver her message to the curate in charge of St. Joseph's. From him she obtained the address of a doctor, and, leaving her cab so as to enable the priest to reach Lozares' bedside as soon as possible, she continued her way on foot.

In a few words she told of the state in which she had found the sick man. The doctor was free to accompany her at once, and as they

walked together to the house, where the priest had preceded them, the former questioned her as to the cause of the attack she described.

"I know no more about it than you do, doctor," replied Lucienne. "Finding that his leg was injured, I went to visit him; and then, when this attack suddenly came on, I was terrified and came for you at once."

"What a place for any one to live in!" exclaimed the doctor, when, after a few moments' walk, they reached their destination, and began to mount the dirty, ill-ventilated staircase. "We pride ourselves upon our sanitation, yet such hotbeds of disease as this are allowed to exist!"

On reaching the garret door they found the priest on his knees beside Lozares. The sick man's head lay on the arm of the worn, black cassock, and the confessor was bending low to catch the faltering words of confession. He raised his hand as a sign to the doctor and his companion to wait for a moment, but almost immediately he got up and came toward them.

"I am afraid there is not much for you to do, doctor," he said. "Come in; I am sorry if I have kept you waiting."

"Me, yes; but not you, Madame," said the doctor. "You are trying to do too much, and unless you rest for awhile I shall have you on my hands also."

"I am stronger than you would think," replied Lucienne, grateful for his thought of her. "But I will do as you tell me. I don't want to hinder you, so I will wait outside; only you must promise to tell me if I can be of any service."

She went out and seated herself on the stairs. The priest, at Lozares' request, had returned to the bedside, and after some time the doctor rejoined Lucienne, having finished his examination of the patient.

"Well, doctor," she asked, in a low voice.

"His constitution is shattered by his own excesses," replied the doctor; "and poverty has finished him off. His leg was broken days ago, and now it is past mending. However, he may linger on for some time. I can at least relieve those attacks of suffocation. They do not come from the heart, but are caused chiefly by the condition he is in and his surroundings." Then, speaking aloud so that Lozares could hear him, he went on: "The first thing to be done is to

get the patient into a clean bed, where the injured limb can be properly dressed, and where he will be given regular nourishment. In short, we must have him taken at once to the hospital."

"No, no!" cried Lozares, trying to rise. "I will not go to the hospital."

"Nonsense!" said the doctor, shortly. "If you do not care to go for your own sake, you must be made to go for the sake of others. That leg of yours is a danger in any house, and if it is not properly looked after I cannot answer for the consequences. It is no use your resisting, because, willing or no, I shall have to send you."

Lozares turned to Lucienne. He was too weak to argue, but she could not resist the pleading in his eyes.

"What can I do, Pedro?" she whispered, understanding what he meant.

"For God's sake, don't let him send me to the hospital!" he answered, in the same low tone that she alone could hear. "Leave me to die if you will, but let me keep my liberty."

There was something almost contemptible in a man who knew that his days were num-

bered clinging like this to liberty, yet to Lucienne it was inexpressibly sad. She turned to the doctor, doubtful as to the possibility of her request being granted.

"Is it absolutely necessary for this man to go to the hospital?" she asked. "Could he not be nursed at home? He seems to dread the idea of being moved."

"At home, Madame!" replied the doctor. "But where is his home? We can hardly dignify this hole with such a name."

"Of course he must be moved from here," returned Lucienne, quickly. "But the attic next door is empty. He could be carried in and a Bon Secours Sister could nurse him."

"And who is to pay for all this?" asked the doctor.

"I will," said Lucienne, quietly.

The doctor looked up at her sharply. Evidently there was something more in this case than appeared at first sight. Who was this aristocratic-looking lady who was so deeply interested in the outcast who lay dying at her feet? It was evident he was no common tramp. What link may have bound these two together in the past?

"If you are kind enough to see that he is properly looked after at home, Madame," he said, "I have no objection. I will write down what is necessary, and if you wish me to attend the case here I will do so."

He pulled out his pocket-book and began to write.

"How can I get all these things at once?" cried Lucienne in dismay, when he handed her his list. "There is so much to be done—"

The priest, who had been standing by, now spoke to Lucienne.

"Perhaps I could help you," he said. "I know someone who works amongst the poor in this district; and I am sure she will undertake to look after this man, if you wish."

"That *would* be kind." Lucienne felt as though a load of care had been lifted from her. "I live so long away from here that I could not do much myself, and even to superintend would mean coming here oftener than I could undertake."

"You need not be uneasy," said the priest. "I can promise that nothing will be neglected or overlooked, once my friend takes charge here."

"Will you tell her, please, to have everything put to my account?" said Lucienne. "I will send you whatever money is needed as soon as I go home." Turning to the doctor, she added: "You will come again? And if he should get worse, or if I am needed for anything, will you let me know at once?"

She held out her card, and the doctor took it, assuring her that he would do all he could for the patient.

"Lucienne," said Lozares, in a low voice, when she went to bid him good-bye, "give me your hand. Let me kiss it!" he pleaded.

She shook her head. "What am I to call you?" she asked, speaking very low.

"My second name is Manuel," he replied.

"Well, good-bye, Manuel!" she said aloud. "M. l'Abbé will send someone to you very soon. I know that I am leaving you in good hands, and I hope you will be very patient."

She held out her hand to the priest. "Thank you, Father!" she said simply, looking up at him.

But he, holding her hand, spoke fervently. "God bless you, my child!" he said.

Lucienne and the doctor went down the

stairs together, leaving the priest with Lozares. It was not so late as Lucienne thought; and, finding she had half an hour to spare before her husband was due home, she bade the coachman drive her back to Notre-Dame des Victoires. Benediction had just been given, and the church was full of people. The scent of incense hung heavily in the air, and as she knelt down a boy's voice rose up clearly. "Laudate Dominum, omnes gentes," he sang. "Laudate eum, omnes populi!"

All at once Lucienne felt that during the years that had passed since the fatal day when the secret of Lozares was first discovered, her heart had never been really pure and free from stain, so as to give praise to God as was fitting. Now a great weight had rolled away. Her forgiveness was complete. At last, in deed as well as in word, she could offer up her struggle and her victory, joining with the singer and saying truly: "Praise be to God!"

CHAPTER IX

MADEMOISELLE FANNY

THE season had begun, and as Raoul was unwilling ever to refuse an invitation, his wife had little time to spare during the weeks that followed her discovery of Lozares. Whenever she could snatch an hour from the round of gaieties in which, to please her husband, her life was passed, she spent it with her parents. Each time she saw them their poverty struck her anew, till there was more pain than pleasure in the visits.

Perhaps the brilliant scenes amongst which she moved made their surroundings appear more sordid than ever; perhaps as their strength lessened they had less courage, less patience with their lot. It certainly seemed to Lucienne that they spoke oftener and more bitterly of the past than they had formerly done; of their ruin, and of him who was the

cause of it. When her father called down the vengeance of heaven upon his false friend, or her mother spoke of the luxuries and pleasures that all his ill-gotten gains were purchasing for Lozares, the scene in the garret rose up before Lucienne, and it was all she could do to keep her secret. Yet every word her father said showed her more and more the impossibility of revealing it. In the state of mind he was in, nothing could have prevented him from giving Lozares up to justice, and her mother had too much to bear already to be burdened any further.

It was several weeks before Lucienne had an afternoon at her own disposal, but on the first possible opportunity she started off for the Quartier du Temple. On reaching the landing at the head of the long stairs, Lucienne could hardly believe that she had come to the right house. The whole place had been scrubbed, and a faint smell of disinfectant cleansed the air. The garret had been swept, and a store of wood was piled in it, together with a table, on which stood several necessities for a sick room.

She knocked at the door of the attic, and a

feeble voice bade her enter. Inside, the transformation was as complete as it was without—all might have belonged to a hospital in charge of nuns. And the change in the patient himself was as thorough as was that of his surroundings.

Propped up with pillows, deathly white, but clean and cared for, Lucienne for the first time saw something of the friend whom she had known from childhood. The last time she had seen him he had indeed been a revolting spectacle; yet, curiously enough, in this new, more familiar guise, she found him more repulsive than ever. This was the man, now in comparative comfort and ease, whose cowardly self-indulgence, to call it by no harder name, had brought all their misfortunes on the De Barlis and on Lucienne herself.

His eyes fell before hers, but she noted that their expression had completely changed. He no longer looked dazed and terrified, at war with himself and with all the world. He could do nothing to repair the past; but at least she was assured of his repentance.

"Are you feeling any better?" asked Lucienne.

"A little, thank you!" he replied. "The pain in my leg is much less, thanks to the doctor and my kind nurse!"

"Who looks after you?" asked Lucienne.

"A nun comes every morning to dress my leg," replied Lozares; "and a woman who lives downstairs brings me my meals and arranges the room; and Mademoiselle Fanny comes very often to see how things are going on. It was she who arranged everything as you see it and who superintends it all. Indeed I have all I want—all," he added in a lower voice, "except what I would willing give my life to obtain, if it were possible."

Lucienne understood that he referred to her father, but she made no answer.

"I sometimes think that it is too presumptuous even to think of pardon," he said suddenly.

"No, no!" replied Lucienne. "God will accept your desire for atonement. You must hope in His mercy."

"Tell me, Lucienne, have you any children?"

"I had one," replied Lucienne, in a low voice; "but he is dead."

"If God gives you others," went on Lozares,

"teach them to deny themselves. Tell them this from me, from a man who learned the truth from the bitterest experience. For thirty years I was honest and honourable, but I had never learned the lesson of self-denial. Then I was tempted, and in one moment I fell—"

"Why dwell on these things?" said Lucienne, seeing how much he was overcome. "They are past now, thank God, forever."

"I *must* tell you" (it seemed as though he was forced to speak). "I was led into temptation and I fell. I needed money; but at first, believe me, I never thought of betraying the trust that your father had placed in me. From Marseilles it was very easy for me to get to Monte Carlo, and, unfortunately, luck favoured me at first. Before the tide turned, the gambler's fever had got hold of me, and though I had begun to lose, I could not stop playing. In less than a year I had lost over four hundred thousand francs. In order to pay this I had to borrow—nay, to steal from your father, and to try and repay this so-called loan. I gave myself up more fiercely than ever to play. I was no longer able to frequent the Casino, having quarrelled with a German there

who was a noted duellist, and who threatened to shoot me if I crossed his path again. The only places where I could indulge my passion for play were low gambling hells in Marseilles, which managed to exist in spite of the police. Sometimes luck favoured me, and I was able to keep my business going; but before very long I had to take from your father's capital to pay him the income which he thought was only interest.

"This had been going on for ten years before your marriage, so you can imagine how much was left by that time of the sum your father had originally confided to me. Then came the question of your fortune. If your husband had not been willing to take the six per cent. that I offered him through your father, I should have been found out at once. Looking back, I do not know how I dared give you a present, how I dared sit at your table and break bread with you all, unconscious victims of my wickedness. Even then, when little more than a hundred thousand francs was left of your father's capital, I still hoped, mad fool that I was, to win enough to repay all. I thought that I had time before me; but when you settled

in Paris your mother wished to buy a house at Juvisy, so as to be nearer to you; and your father wrote to me for eighty thousand francs from his capital. The long expected moment had come. Two courses were open to me: I could confess all, face your father's just anger, and expiate my crime as far as I could by giving myself up to justice, or I could fly. You know which course I chose."

A knock at the door interrupted his story, and it was Lucienne who said: "Come in!"

The door opened very gently, and a little lady entered, small and frail and old, just like the pictures of a fairy godmother in a child's picture-book. Her silk dress was nearly covered by a wadded cloak, old-fashioned in shape, and rather shabby. A hood was over her head, so that nothing but the frill of her bonnet was to be seen, and she carried an ivory-headed cane in her hand.

"Mademoiselle Fanny!" said Lozares.

Lucienne rose from her chair and went forward to welcome the newcomer. She held out a daintily gloved hand, and Lucienne noticed the fine lace ruffles at her wrist.

"I know that I have the pleasure of speaking

to Madame Mauvoisin," she said, in a sweet, low voice.

"I am ashamed to think how often you have been here without seeing me," replied Lucienne; "and I have so much to thank you for."

"We have been expecting you for a long time," went on Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille. "I have heard so often of you that I confess I was getting impatient to see you."

Her looks, as they rested on the beautiful face at the sick man's bedside, showed that her expectations had been more than fulfilled.

Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille and Lucienne had much to talk of together. The former told of what she had done, and the latter could not express her gratitude for all that had been thought of and the way in which it had been carried out.

From this their conversation turned to other things; for, despite the difference of age, the two women brought together in so strange a manner felt from the first that they were congenial spirits. The sight of Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille's servant, who came in carrying a basket of oranges, was a fresh surprise to Lucienne. He was tall, slim, and as black

as polished ebony, wearing a pale blue livery that suited his dusky complexion to perfection.

Mademoiselle Fanny took the oranges from the dark hand, baring her own so as to prepare it for Lozares, who, like a true Spaniard, enjoyed nothing better than the fruit of his native land. Lucienne noticed the rings on the shapely little hands, and catching sight of the coat of arms that was cut on one of them, she guessed that their wearer was a member of an old family which had once been of importance, but that had sunk to insignificance on account of its poverty in this money-loving age. In spite of her shabby garments, everything about the little old lady confirmed this opinion of her; and when Lozares had eaten the fruit she rose with the air of a duchess and held out her hand to Lucienne.

"It is time for me to be going," she said. "But, dear Madame, now that I have had the pleasure of meeting you I want to ask you a favour. Could you spare time in your gay life to visit a lonely old woman?"

"Mademoiselle, if you will allow me!" cried Lucienne, her whole manner emphasizing the truth of what she said. "I shall be honoured."

Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille drew out a card from her case and handed it to Lucienne. Seeing the address it bore, the latter could not help exclaiming at the distance it was from where they were. The old lady only laughed at her dismay.

"We are independent people, José and I," she said; but her serious tone was belied by the twinkle in her steel grey eyes. "My carriage is waiting for me. I am sorry, however, that I cannot offer you a seat."

Lucienne bowed, somewhat mystified, as the little lady evidently meant her to be.

"May I offer you my arm?" she said; for José had disappeared at the first mention of the carriage.

Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille laid her hand on Lucienne's with a smile, but Lozares held her back a moment.

"Come again soon!" he pleaded. "It does me good only to see you."

"Hush!" said Lucienne, drawing her dress away from him; for it seemed so ungrateful after all her companion had done for him that it should be she whom he wished to see. "I will come as soon as I can, be sure of that."

They went slowly down the long stairs together, the little old lady and the tall young one; but, to Lucienne's surprise, on reaching the door there was no sign of a carriage.

"José will be here in a moment," said Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille; and as she spoke the rumbling of wheels was heard in the court-yard, and José appeared, dragging a light bath-chair.

"You see, I am a selfish person," said Mademoiselle Fanny, laughing delightedly at Lucienne's amazement.

"That I can never believe," replied Lucienne,, as she helped the old lady into her chair; then, standing for a moment, she watched the quaint pair out of sight.

Lucienne had delayed longer than she had intended, and, calling a passing cab, she told the man to drive quickly to the Rue Taitbout. Her thoughts were very different from what they had been on the occasion of her last visit. Then they had been sorrowful, dwelling on Lozares and on the past, now they dwelt happily on the present. She was enjoying the rare feeling of having made a true friend after only a single meeting.

CHAPTER X

NEW FRIENDSHIP

THE address that Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille had given to Lucienne was away at the other side of the Luxembourg Gardens, and it was some days before Raoul's engagements eft his wife free to pay her promised visit there. It was an old-fashioned quarter, and each house was built round a courtyard. The gate before which Lucienne stopped enclosed not a yard, but a veritable shrubbery of plants and evergreen trees; and, entering, she found that the farther end, which was guarded by a wire railing, was a real garden where spring flowers were struggling into bloom. Unlike its neighbours, the house in this garden was small and low. The door stood ajar, and no sooner had Lucienne rung the bell than a Belgian griffon ran out yapping a welcome, and wagging its tail in the most friendly fashion. The lapdog's

note of warning was heard by José the negro, and a moment later, he had ushered the visitor into a tiled hall spotlessly clean, with Indian draperies covering the four doors that led off it to the other parts of the house.

The negro raised one of these curtains, and Lucienne, passing under it, found herself in a small drawing-room, furnished half a century or more ago in a style that had been the very best; but as the upholstery dated back to the same period, the room had the same quaint air of faded distinction that its little old mistress bore.

Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille was an old maid. She was shabby and apparently poor. Her life was spent in an unfashionable part of Paris, and her time was devoted to good works; yet her visitor discovered something in her conversation quite unlike, and infinitely more attractive than, anything she had ever met with elsewhere. She was accustomed in her own home to associate with well-educated, even with cultivated people. The Mauvoisins' friends had all the attractions that money can give; but this little old lady in her old-world home possessed the nameless fascination that before

the Revolution may have been more general in France, but that is only to be found nowadays in the few families who can claim to belong to the Faubourg Saint Germain.

Lucienne was completely subjugated by this charm, and whatever her hostess had said she would have listened to with attention, even if the subject had been of less engrossing interest to her than it was. Although she did not know it, it was her own sympathy that drew the recital of her past life from Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille—a recital that had not passed her lips for years, although her mind dwelt continually upon the days gone by.

When scarcely more than a child herself, she had been left an orphan with four little motherless sisters in her charge. A miniature larger than the others, hanging round the woodwork of the fireplace, showed the four baby heads grouped together in the style of Raphael's angels. Three of these children had not lived to grow up. The heart of the young adopting mother had early learned the lesson of pain; but the fourth, the only remaining treasure, had perhaps taught her greater depths of suffering than the loss of the other

three had caused. Against the advice of her relations, Sophie de Rochefeuille had married a distant connection and had gone to live in India. Ten years later she had come back to her sister, alone, her youth gone, stolen away by the illness that ever since, for almost thirty years, had kept her a prisoner in her room.

"How good God is!" concluded Mademoiselle Fanny gently, when she had recounted all this to Lucienne. "I am twenty years older than my sister, although her illness has altered her so much that you would never think it; so when she goes, I can hope that our parting will not be a very long one."

She smiled so serenely that Lucienne was almost startled. She was realising for the first time that suffering and death may be met with peace, even with content; and it came to her suddenly to wonder if she and her husband were spending their lives in a way that would earn for them, when their end drew near, the serenity that this lady enjoyed.

"I wonder if you could spare the time to pay my sister a little visit?" she asked. "I have spoken to her of you, and she would like so much to make your acquaintance."

"There is nothing that I should like better," replied Lucienne, eagerly. "I was hoping that you might propose it, as I should not have dared to suggest it myself."

José did not answer the bell that Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille rang. But the curtain was raised by his double, only this second black apparition wore the plain gown of a maid, and the dusky curls were covered by a muslin cap.

"Is Madame la Comtesse ready to receive us, Rita?" asked Mademoiselle Fanny.

The negress smiled, and showed a row of teeth as brilliantly white as those of her brother.

"Madame la Comtesse is waiting," she said, holding back the curtain.

"Come!" said Mademoiselle Fanny to Lucienne. "You must remember that the days of which I have been speaking, when my dear sister was acknowledged as a queen of society beauties, are long past. You will only see the wreck of her former loveliness."

Entering the big, sunny room, where the signs of loving hands and loving thoughts for its invalid inmate were everywhere visible, Lucienne's first thought was indeed, "Oh, what

a wreck!" But she quickly forgot all else in the beauty of the great dark eyes, more blue than grey, that lighted up the white fragile face lying on pillows hardly whiter than itself. The delicate features were drawn, and the soft grey hair, falling loosely above the brow, cast an almost deathlike shadow upon them.

"She was acknowledged everywhere as a queen of society beauties," Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille's words came back to Lucienne; now they gave her quite a shock. Those lovely eyes belonged to someone of a higher order than a mere society beauty. Perhaps the younger woman's own eyes showed something of the admiration that she felt, for, smiling at her visitor, the invalid stretched out her hand with a gesture that was almost caressing.

"How kind of you to come and see me!" she said. "My sister has spoken of you so often that I have been looking forward to your visit as impatiently as she has herself."

The colour mounted to Lucienne's pale cheeks as she expressed her regret for having been unable to take advantage of Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille's invitation any sooner. Then, embarrassed by the scrutiny with which

Madame de Mantelon continued to regard her, she went on haltingly to refer to her gratitude for all that had been done for Lozares.

"There is no need to apologize for any trouble that your poor man has occasioned," said Madame de Mantelon, smiling rather sadly. "My sister has had so much experience of illness that such a case as yours is only an excuse for showing her powers, both of nursing and of organization."

Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille disclaimed all merit beyond a naturally active disposition which had to find an outlet outside the little home sphere enclosed between the garden walls; and listening, as the sisters spoke half playfully together, Lucienne was struck anew by the extraordinary charm that seemed to lie in their every word and action. Time passed so quickly that she could not believe that half-an-hour had gone by when the negress appeared a second time at the door, and announced that Monseigneur wished to see Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille.

"Monseigneur!" cried Mademoiselle, rising quickly. "Will you excuse me, Madame?" turning to Lucienne. "I had no idea that he

had arrived in Paris. He wrote to us from Lyons only two days ago."

Lucienne had happened to notice the arrival recorded in the papers that morning of this prelate, a high dignitary at the Vatican, and she could not help wondering how so busy a man could spare time in the few days he was to spend in Paris to visit the little old lady.

"You are surprised to find what an important personage you have come to see!" said Madame de Mantelon, laughing, and again reading her visitor's thoughts; then, seeing that Lucienne was confused at being read aright, she quickly changed the subject, begging her visitor to come again. As she left the room Lucienne heard, softly spoken, "Au Revoir!"

The sorrows that had pressed so heavily on her young life had raised a barrier between Lucienne and her own contemporaries; but she had hardly realised how lonely this barrier had made her until these two old ladies, who had met and conquered sorrow, and whose hearts had remained youthful in spite of all, had stretched out their hands to her and drawn her to them with the steadfast clasp of true friendship.

CHAPTER XI

AN UNPLEASANT DISCUSSION

LUCIENNE could not herself have explained the fascination that her newly made friends already possessed for her, but during the days that followed her visit to them her mind kept going back to the invalid's room, quiet and sunny, in the midst of the noise and darkness of the surrounding streets, where for the first time for many months she had been so taken out of herself as to forget for the present the burden of sorrows that lay so heavily upon her young shoulders. Tactful by nature, and rendered doubly so by the circumstances of her life, she was still debating within herself as to how soon another visit to Madame de Mantelon would be courteous and friendly without being intrusive, when Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille decided the question by coming to return her visit.

Raoul was going out one afternoon when he met the little old lady mounting the stairs, helped in the ascent by the strong arm of José. It was unmistakable even in the half light that the quaint figure in her old-fashioned silk gown was a lady; and although Raoul did not connect her with what his wife had told him of her new friends, he raised his hat as he passed her by.

Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille acknowledged the courtesy by a slight inclination; but the young man would have been somewhat surprised if he had known how true an insight to his character the one quick glance that she bestowed upon him had given to the unknown passer-by.

"So that is her husband!" was Mademoiselle's inward comment. "He is got up too much like a tailor's block for my taste; yet there is something in his face that I like. I think he is not altogether unworthy of his sweet little wife. Yes, for his own sake as well as for hers, he is worth helping."

The old lady's instinct did not deceive her; there was good in Raoul Mauvoisin, and as she met him he was bound on an errand that he did not like, and yet that he had undertaken to do.

Madame Mauvoisin, who spoke so much of the serenity and happiness of her daughter's household in comparison to the misfortunes that her daughter-in-law had brought upon the family, had lately had some misgivings as to the entire truth of her boasting. Madame de Charolles had not confided in her mother, and outwardly everything was supposed to be going well; but at last, on the morning of Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille's visit to Lucienne, she had decided to seek advice from her brother, and Raoul, very much against his own inclinations, was being dragged into the disagreement that he now learned existed between his sister and her husband.

Madame de Charolles had asked Raoul to meet her in the Bois de Boulogne, where, leaning back beside her in her smooth-running electric brougham, he listened in silence to the story of her woes, if her feelings may be so described, when, in point of fact, she was as yet far more angry than unhappy.

For some time past Monsieur de Charolles had been odd and irritable, altogether unlike himself; nothing seemed to please him; and the climax was that on the previous day he had

told his wife that in future she must not only spend less money on her clothes, but that the expenses of their household must immediately be reduced as much as was possible without the world's being made aware of their retrenchments.

Raoul, who had learned from personal experience to look upon his sister's extravagances more critically than he would have done some time ago, was inclined to sympathise with his brother-in-law; but Madame de Charolles would not listen to his half-hearted remonstrances, till at last, losing patience, he spoke more decidedly.

"My dear Louise," he said, "you are only looking at your own side of the question. Try and put yourself in Frédéric's place for a moment, and then I think you will have to own that you are just a little extravagant."

"Well, even if I did spend more than some other people's wives," went on Louise, "I am only spending what is my own. I did not come to my husband empty-handed or worse. I am not a parasite—"

"Louise!" interrupted Raoul, angrily. "Remember whom you are speaking to!"

"I do not see why you should not hear the truth for once?" retorted Louise.

"It is *not* the truth!" replied Raoul, coldly. "I do not see why Lucienne need be dragged into the question; but, as you have referred to her, let me tell you once and for all that whatever she spends it is with my sanction—nay, more, at my request."

"Then I must congratulate you on being so implicitly obeyed," sneered Louise. "However, I do maintain for my own credit that I am always pleasant and good-tempered with Frédéric. I never put on the repellant, haughty—I am never like Lucienne."

"Repellant, haughty? I don't know what you mean!" cried Raoul. "No one is gentler, more charming than Lucienne."

"When she wishes, perhaps, but not always, by any means."

Madame de Charolles had seen so little of her brother since his marriage, except in public, that he had no idea how deeply she shared the feelings toward Lucienne that Madame Mauvoisin took no trouble to conceal from him; and Lucienne was far too noble, far too anxious to shield her husband from any further annoyance

than what she had unwittingly brought upon him, to have let him guess at the many slights she had to endure from his sister—slights that in her case were prompted as much by personal envy as by the offended family pride that was at the root of Madame Mauvoisin's dislike to Lucienne.

Now, however, Madame de Charolles had lost her temper, and in turning thus on Lucienne she showed Raoul something of her real nature that he had never seen before. For a moment he listened in silence to the tirade that his last words had called forth; then, leaning forward to tell the chauffeur to stop, he spoke coldly and contemptuously.

"I understand what you mean now," he said. "My wife is too well dressed to please you. You do not like me to give her a free hand as far as her dress allowance is concerned; and, now that I come to think of it, you are not far wrong. Money spent on decking Lucienne out is certainly wasted; for whatever she wears there is something in her looks, something in the way she puts on the simplest things, that no money could buy for you, or for most women of my acquaintance."

He sprang from his seat, and as he alighted motioned the man to drive on; and it was not until he was left some yards behind that Madame de Charolles began to recover from the parting thrust that he had given her, almost unbearable as it was, because it revealed the jealousy that she thought to have kept secret from all.

With his usual indolent good-nature, Raoul soon regretted what he had said; but by the time he reached home he forgot his annoyance, and greeted Lucienne just as she would have wished if she could have prompted his words. On going upstairs, the remembrance of the quaint figures he had passed when going out came back to him, and his first words to his wife were a question concerning her visitors.

"You don't know what you have missed!" cried Lucienne; and she told him about her friend, whom she found even more delightful on closer acquaintance than she had thought her at first. As on the afternoon that Lucienne had spent in the Rue d'Arras, so on the return visit time had flown on golden wings.

Lucienne's enthusiasm in telling of the charms of Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille was

contagious, and Raoul's interest was aroused.

"Where on earth did you make her acquaintance?" he asked.

"In an attic, an absolute garret, on the sixth floor of a house—such a house as you have never seen from inside," replied Lucienne. "She had come to the rescue of an unfortunate man in whom I am interested. You would not have believed—would you?—that in my poor people's country roses grow sometimes."

"Evidently they do, dear," said Raoul. "I suppose roses and thorns are to be found in most places. Certainly they both grow in my friends' gardens."

Lucienne looked up quickly at her husband. Was he thinking of the past, of the thorns that through Lozares she had brought into his life? But no, no; with all his faults, he was too generous to refer to what was past, and, laying her hand on his arm, she searched his face anxiously.

"Thorns," she repeated; "but not in your own life? Tell me, Raoul, if anything has happened—at least let me have a share in your annoyances."

"What an anxious little being it is!" He

took his wife's face between his hands, and looked down on her, smiling, showing her for once that her sympathy was very dear to him.

"They are not very long thorns, only pin pricks at present. I have been driving with Louise, and listening to her account of a domestic tempest that seems to be going on in the De Charolles' household. He complains of her extravagance; she thinks herself, in consequence, the most ill-treated woman in the world."

"Poor Louise!" Lucienne sighed as her eyes rested for a moment on the picture of her dead baby. "How sad it is to make oneself unhappy when one has so much, so very much to be thankful for!"

"Well, it certainly sounded to me like a storm in a teacup; but it has not improved Louise's temper, I assure you."

"Poor Louise! Can you do nothing to help her, Raoul—to advise her?"

The remembrance of what "poor Louise" had said of Lucienne came back to Raoul, and he frowned angrily.

"She is impossible!" he cried. "But I did what I could. I dare say De Charolles is quite

right; in any case, I don't hold with any outside interference between husband and wife."

If to Lucienne came a thought of how often Madame Mauvoisin's influence over her son had overruled the excellent maxim to which he now gave voice, she quickly put it aside; and at a further question from him she passed from the evidently distasteful subject of Louise and her extravagance, and went on telling of Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille and the interesting things that she had said about her youth in the West Indies and of the travels of her older days.

Madame Mauvoisin was satisfied that her son should belong to a smart club, and be more or less intimate with its members; but Lucienne aspired to something higher for her husband. His abilities were above the average, only, living the life he did, his best powers were seldom called forth. Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille, quaint and old-fashioned and obscure as she seemed to be, was just the kind of person who would appeal to the better side of Raoul's mind; and when, after hearing the whole recital of the afternoon's visit, he asked Lucienne to take him with her when next she went to see

her friend, he unknowingly gave her the greatest pleasure she had felt for many a day. Had Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille had a brother, Lucienne felt that he would have been a noble Christian gentleman; and it seemed to her that somehow, through this new opening, help might come to Raoul whereby his natural qualities might be cultivated and fostered until he, too, reached that high plane which his wife aspired to for him, and which, notwith anding her love for him, she knew he had not yet attained.

CHAPTER XII

A WELCOME PROPOSAL

MUCH as Lucienne had looked forward to her second visit to the little house in the Rue d'Arras, she was not disappointed with the visit itself. Raoul, though at first inclined to criticise the well-worn furniture and faded hangings, had fallen at once under the charm of the little old lady and her sister.

"But they are delightful—absolutely delightful, my dear!" he cried, as he walked home at Lucienne's side. "Poor as church mice, that is easily seen; but such breeding, such intelligence! And the invalid must once have been magnificently beautiful, but I am not sure that your first friend is not the more attractive. Fancy what they must have been thirty or forty years ago! I wish I knew a few more people who are as good company as the two we have just left."

After this the friendship so auspiciously begun throve apace. Whenever Lucienne suggested another visit to the little old house Raoul signified his intention of accompanying her; and when Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille came to their apartment he made it a point of being at home to receive her. One day, however, she came on a day when, he had happened to mention, he would be going into the country with some friends; and when she and Lucienne had talked together for a time she inquired after him.

"He is quite well, thank you!" replied Lucienne; "but he will be very disappointed when he hears that he has missed seeing you."

"How nice of you to say so! Tell him from me that I, too, was very sorry to miss him, only—" (Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille paused for a moment.) "Tell him, also," she went on, "that we are grateful to him for his courtesy and visits."

"Grateful! Oh, Mademoiselle, you do not know how much we both enjoy our visits to you; it is rather we who are grateful to you."

"No, no!" returned Mademoiselle. "It is right that old people should be grateful when

young ones, especially young men, seek their company. No; in this case I will not say especially young men, for, if you do not mind my saying so, my dear—I speak for my sister as well as for myself—we have become very fond of our dear little visitor." She laid her soft, withered fingers on Lucienne's hand; and the girl, with a sudden flush of gratification, raised them quickly to her lips. It was an impulsive gesture, but one that seemed quite natural; for the old lady in her faded silk had all the dignity of a little queen.

"Yes, my dear, very, *very* dear," there was something more than affection in the smile with which she accepted Lucienne's grateful thanks —a mysterious something that certainly boded no ill for its recipient; but she said nothing more, and soon turned the conversation.

"I think it is time for me to make a confession," she said, half seriously. "Would you thank me so much for my visit to you to-day if you knew that it was prompted by interested motives?"

Lucienne looked at her incredulously.

"Unless you told me so yourself, I should not believe it," she replied.

"But it is true," said the old lady, now smiling outright. "Quite true. I am a beggar; nothing more and nothing less."

"Then I do thank you," returned Lucienne quickly, and now smiling also. "Because by coming here as a beggar you are giving me the opportunity of doing something for you."

"I cannot claim even that" (Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille was enjoying her little mystery) "because it is not you, but your husband from whom I want something."

"What a pity he is not at home!" cried Lucienne. "Only I know that I can promise you anything in his name."

"Will you ask him, then, to make no engagement for Sunday morning next? I want him to go to Saint Roch for High Mass. There is to be a charity sermon and a collection for the sick poor of the parish; and I want your husband to give his arm to one of the ladies who will make the collection, the Marquise de R——."

The name that Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille mentioned was well known in Paris as belonging to one of the most sought after, yet perhaps the most exclusive, of the leaders of that

dwindling remnant known as the ancient aristocracy. To be associated in public with Madame de R—— was an honour that even Raoul's most fashionable friends would not have aspired to.

"She is a very delightful woman," went on the old lady. "We have been friends for a great many years—for all her life, I may say—and I often meet her on my rounds. Her brother, Monsieur de Montgeoffroy, is quite as charming as she is. He is wonderfully clever and interested in all kinds of literary and scientific things; yet he is the most kind-hearted, the most tender-hearted man to the poor that I have ever met. He is the life and soul of numberless charitable undertakings; and, as he has the most wonderful influence over young men of his own class, he is able to turn everyone he meets—everyone who is worth it, that is to say, into coadjutors. The good that he does in all classes is incalculable."

But Lucienne was hardly attending now to what was being said. She knew, with quick, unerring instinct, that this chance-met, shabby old maid had guessed the deepest, inmost secret of her heart; she had found out her longing

that Raoul's life should be utilised, elevated. This Monsieur de Montgeoffroy must be the very ideal of what Lucienne had dreamed of for her husband, and Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille had laid her secret bare. "How did you guess?" she murmured in amazement, her cheeks glowing and her eyes swimming in tears.

"My dear, you have never said a word. You are the most loyal wife in all the world. I was interested in you from the first; and remember, I am a very old woman and have had a great deal of experience and of sorrow, the best of all mistresses, when one has once learned how to profit by her lessons. Sorrow has given me a deep insight into character, and has, I hope and think, widened my sympathies. I feel, my dear, that I know you well. Is it not natural, then, that I should realise your aspirations for your husband? I have studied him, and have found out his qualities, his possibilities; otherwise, even for your sake, I would not have proposed this introduction."

"It is an answer to many, many prayers!" cried Lucienne. "I have prayed and prayed for him that he might become what this

Monsieur de Montgeoffroy seems to be. Oh, Mademoiselle! Raoul is good and clever, only he wants someone wiser and better than I to lead and help him!"

"He could have no better friend than Monsieur de Montgeoffroy; and, please God, he will profit by the friendship," said Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille. "Only you must remember that when a man has allowed himself to become as indifferent about religion as your husband seems to be it takes time and patience for any real improvement to come about. This seems to be a very small beginning, but great results have grown from less. Now that we have a few moments alone together tell me something more about yourself, so that I may know how best to help you further. Have you many intimate friends in Paris?"

"Raoul has," replied Lucienne; "but I have none."

"None?"

"No, Mademoiselle. You see I was a stranger; and though his mother's friends invite me to their houses, I do not care for any of them. You are the first friend that I have made since my marriage."

She went on to tell her sympathetic listener something of the state of things that existed between the two families, and though she was obliged to refer to the influence that Raoul's mother and sister exerted over him, she allowed no note of personal feeling into her recital; and when going on to speak of her own parents she only alluded vaguely to the loss of their fortune, fearing if she even owned that their loss had been brought about by a fraudulent trustee Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille's penetration might possibly have revealed the truth to her.

When she had finished her sad story her old friend felt she would no longer be working in the dark in trying to help in Raoul's regeneration; and before taking leave she begged Lucienne to come herself and to take her husband as often as ever she wished to the little house in the Rue d'Arras, where a warm welcome would always await them. Then, ringing for José, she bade her hostess farewell, and drove off in the fiacre that was awaiting her, her chair being kept for shorter excursions in her own less busy quarter of the city.

CHAPTER XIII

FOR HUMAN RESPECT

WHAT Lucienne had vainly wished for so long had come to pass, and this in the most unlikely manner possible. The little old lady of the Luxembourg had opened a door that neither Raoul nor Lucienne had ever thought to enter. This door led into a totally different world from that in which their life had hitherto been spent.

The Mauvoisins moved amongst a circle of people rich, well educated, if teaching without culture can be so called, whose god was fashion, and whose sole aim and object in life was to amuse themselves. Instead of the blasé young clubmen with whom Raoul had been accustomed to associate, he would now be introduced to people who, whilst socially his superiors, did not think the working classes and the poor beneath their notice. Most of them were well

off, and many of their names were widely and honourably known in the world of sport and of healthy amusement, but their minds were cultivated; they were all able to take an intelligent interest in books and pictures, in travel, even in the sciences. Then, too, there was a band of younger men amongst them who were actively interested in social work amongst the poor—a band whose views were too progressive for some amongst the older generation, who clung to the tenets as well as to the courtesies of what is called the "ancien régime." But the younger men saw clearly the necessity for educated leaders who would sympathise with the poor, and at the same time help them to help themselves. In so doing they not only worked for the good of souls, their own and others, and for the good of their country, but they created interests that had hitherto been lacking in their lives, and whilst trying to make others happier, they became insensibly better and happier themselves.

It was in this band that Raoul would now have the opportunity of enrolling himself. Not that he was aware of all this; to him the introduction to the Marquise de R—— simply

meant a social honour; and Lucienne, who knew what this first step was intended to lead to, and was silent about it, feared by a word to interfere with what she hoped for so much.

In accepting Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille's nvitation, Raoul was like a traveller who embarks on a voyage merely for the pleasure of the journey itself, careless of where the boat will take him; but when he finds that the tide has carried him to a new country, beautiful, rich, and prosperous, he decides never to go back to the dull and arid place in which he had up to this been content to dwell, and, making his home in the new country, he thanks God for having led him to it.

The first task that this new acquaintanceship imposed upon Raoul he considered both a pleasure and an honour; and, curiously enough, it was to the chief failings of his character that Lucienne looked to help him on his way. He had always been childishly eager over any new undertaking, but up to this he had tired of everything as quickly as he had taken it up; now his human respect would keep him to his new occupations, which he was flattered at being asked to undertake.

Knowing her husband's weakness, Lucienne dared not count for certain on his carrying out the programme that, with her old friend's assistance, she had laid down for him, until she had heard her mother-in-law's opinion of this new venture. They had called together at the Mauvoisins' house, and Raoul had begun, half carelessly, to tell his mother of the ceremony in which he was to take part. As Lucienne had foreseen, Madame Mauvoisin seemed inclined at first to dissuade him from doing anything that was not within her own little circle, but when he mentioned that the lady he had been asked to escort was the Marquise de R——, her expression immediately changed.

"What!" she cried in astonishment. "Not Madame de R——! Why, Raoul, she is one of the most exclusive hostesses in Paris! Do you really mean that you are to take her round for the *quête?*"

"Yes, indeed," answered Raoul gaily, delighted at the impression that his news had created. "Madame de R——, and no other."

Madame Mauvoisin's face was radiant as she turned to her son.

"I shall go and see you," she said beamingly;

and Lucienne, who had not dared look up during the discussion, breathed freely at last; her cause was gained, and this time it was the human respect of mother and son alike that had won the victory.

How well Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille understood human nature! Lucienne had perfect confidence in her friend, and when time passed, and she began to be disheartened at Raoul's not making faster progress in the way she had mapped out for him, she always took heart afresh after a talk with Mademoiselle.

"You must have patience, my dear," the old lady would say—"patience and confidence in God. A gardener never takes up a seed because he does not see it beginning to sprout at once; and you must remember how lately the seed of Raoul's conversion, if I may so call it, has been sown. Wait and pray, and believe me you will not be disappointed."

The first result that came from the new interests in Raoul's life was that he began to tire of his old acquaintances, and many of the hours that he had formerly spent lounging about in their company at the club were now passed in Lucienne's company. Her life up

to this had often been very lonely, and she welcomed the change eagerly, treasuring up every moment that her husband now chose to spend with her. There was but one drawback to her newly found happiness. Whenever she went to see Mademoiselle de Rouchefeuille and her sister, Raoul accompanied her; indeed it was often he who proposed a visit to the little old ladies.

It was curious to see how completely this young man of the world was fascinated by the inmates of the little house in the Luxembourg; and Lucienne was obliged to banish a scheme which had been very near her heart, so as to ensure that these visits should continue undisturbed. In the early days of her acquaintance with Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille she had looked forward eagerly to the time when she could introduce her parents to her new friend. She had intended to ask permission to make the introduction as soon as she felt that her own intimacy with Mademoiselle had grown sufficiently to justify such a request; but when that time did arrive, the newer, more daring scheme for Raoul's benefit had come into being. Lucienne knew then that she must

abandon her earlier wish; for her husband would certainly give up frequenting a house where he might be in danger of meeting his father-in-law. In his heart he had always known that he was acting wrongly toward her parents, but he was too proud to own to his fault; and rather than let this be revealed to the little old ladies he would most certainly give up his visits to them.

CHAPTER XIV

THE ALBUM

As the summer advanced, the attic where Lozares still lay helpless became unbearably hot, and Lucienne tried to visit him in the mornings before the great heat of the day came on so as to let a little air into his room, and to close the shutters that she had had put up, but which he was unable to reach for himself. It was arranged that Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille should either go herself or send the negro, José, in the evenings, to open the windows again and let in the cooler air of the night.

Lucienne was touched at the intense gratitude that her poor protégé showed toward her, and she was edified at his sorrow and remorse for the past, as also at the patience with which he bore his sufferings. He liked her to speak to him of the next world, and of the

infinite pity and mercy of God. One thing only seemed really to distress him, and that was the knowledge that his old friend whom he had so basely betrayed had not forgiven him.

"If only I could see him again! Oh, Lucienne, it is not the least part of my just punishment that I shall die without being able to confess all to your father, and to beg on my knees for his forgiveness!"

Over and over again this cry had been repeated, and though it wrung Lucienne's heart, she was powerless to bring about what the wretched man desired. Whenever she tried to speak of Lozares to her parents she was chilled or checked; and she felt instinctively that the time had not yet come for revealing the truth to them. Indeed, if Lucienne had let her father know that his false friend was in Paris, or even that she knew of his whereabouts, she felt that he would not rest until the unfortunate wretch who was so cruelly expiating his crimes in secret was handed over to the police.

It was the continually repeated desire to see his old and much injured friend that made Lucienne take her photograph album with her

one day to the attic, so that Lozares might see the portraits of those whom he spoke of so often. "There are portraits in it of my husband's family as well as of my own," said Lucienne after removing the wrapper. And she turned the leaves over rapidly, but not so rapidly that Lozares did not catch sight of one of the pictured faces.

At that moment Lucienne bent down to pick up her parasol that had fallen to the floor, and she did not see the quick gesture that turned the leaves back to a certain page, but her ear caught a stifled cry; and, looking up quickly, she saw that Lozares had fallen back on his pillows, his face deathly white, and with a look of mingled fear and horror in his great dark eyes.

"Your husband's people?" he questioned, in a husky voice. "And others too?"

"No," replied Lucienne, with a sudden unreasoning pang of foreboding. "It is just a family album. But what makes you ask?"

The portraits that lay upturned upon the pallet were those of Madame de Charolles, with her children at her knee—a beautiful picture of maternal tenderness—and opposite were the

dark, almost satanic, features of the husband and father. Lucienne had always shrunk instinctively from her sister-in-law's husband; but she had chidden herself for this antipathy, which she could neither control nor explain, and had vainly tried to look with Raoul's eyes upon the most important member of her family-in-law. Now all at once something in the portrait that she had never noticed before justified her hidden feelings, and she turned quickly to Lozares for explanations.

"That man? Why is he here?" the words had burst from the invalid's lips before he had time to weigh or consider them; then, seeing the anguish on Lucienne's face, he would have given all the world to have left them unsaid. But it was too late. Lucienne's suspicions were aroused, and she answered quickly, joining another question to her reply.

"He is my brother-in-law; but tell me what you know about him?"

"Your—your brother?" Lozares seemed unable to understand.

"Her husband," explained Lucienne, pointing to the portrait of Madame de Charolles, whose face was already known to Lozares.

"Her husband!" he repeated. "My God!"

"Pedro, Pedro!" cried Lucienne. "Tell me what you mean. Explain to me why the sight of Monsieur de Charolles upsets you so much."

"Monsieur de Charolles! Is that his name? Then it is not he. But no, a name can be changed; but a face such as that—never!" And he covered his own face with his hands.

Lucienne was trembling in every limb.

"You *must* tell me!" she cried. "Pedro, you have no right to torture me so. At least you can answer my question. What do you know of Monsieur de Charolles?"

"Wait!" said Lozares, his face drawn with anguish. "Give me a moment to consider whether in this case ignorance is not better for you than knowledge."

"Not at present," replied Lucienne. "It is too late now for ignorance. I *must* know."

"Then you insist upon my telling you?"

"Yes, I insist."

"That man—De Charolles, or whatever he may call himself—that man won, or at least took, much—nay, most—of your fortune."

"What! Impossible! Pedro, you must be dreaming!"

"No; his face is too firmly imprinted upon my mind for any mistake to be possible. He was one of the foremost members of that gang of thieves and gamblers of whom I told you, who frequented the private gambling rooms where I was utterly ruined."

CHAPTER XV

THE GAMBLER

It seemed to Lucienne that she had known for a long time, for years, those things of which Lozares spoke; unconsciously she had been prepared for some such revelation concerning the man into whose hands the fortune of the Mauvoisin family had passed. Yet the reality was so much worse than anything she could have imagined, that all her past troubles sank away to nothing before this awful disclosure that she now had to face. Lozares, seeing the tears in her eyes, stretched out his hand and laid it on her knee.

"Lucienne," he whispered, "can you forgive me for bringing this new sorrow upon you?"

His voice brought her back to the needs of the present, and she began to question him eagerly. Gilbert—for in his less prosperous days Monsieur de Charolles had not aspired to

a title—Gilbert had started life as a bank clerk at Marseilles; and, having an unusually clear head for finance, he had risen rapidly, until when Lozares knew him he was manager of a large banking firm in that city. Even so, his ambition was not satisfied; banking was too slow a method of making money, and the gambler's instinct prompted him to tempt fortune in a more dangerous manner. After he had made up his mind to enter one of the gambling hells, he became the moving spirit of the place.

The money at his command seemed endless, and the company into which he was thrown was not one that could afford to ask any inconvenient questions. Then his luck was apparently invincible. Night after night he sat down to play, and rose from the tables a richer man by many thousands of francs. From Lozares alone he had won five thousand francs in a few hours. Was his play honest? If it was not he was too clever to be found out. It was not until after the game was lost that Lozares learned of this man's continuous luck; for he had not long been frequenting the house where Gilbert was well known.

"The first time I noticed him," said Lozares,

for, once Lucienne had persuaded him to speak, he told her all and fully, "he was playing a losing game, and playing badly. I saw him lose a large sum of money, but apparently he could afford the loss. At the time I little guessed that, stranger as he was to me, he knew everything that was to be known of my concerns, and that the losing game was merely a decoy to tempt me on to ruin. His opponent had been paid, and had left him, when suddenly he stopped me as I passed.

" 'I'm cleared out except for this,' he said abruptly, tossing a six-thousand franc note upon the table; 'that means that I am ruined. Look here! I'll play you for that note, if you can put another like it in the pool. You're a first-rate player, I hear; but I must take my chance, and I believe it's easier to blow one's brains out with an empty pocket than with so paltry a lining as that.'

"I had seen him play, and felt certain of beating him; yet something made me hesitate to take up his challenge.

" 'Well?' he said; and I thought his tone was insolent from a man who owned to be so nearly ruined. 'Yes or no, take it or leave it.'

"'Yes,' I answered curtly; and under my breath I added: 'And so much the worse for you!'

"He began to play clumsily and stupidly, precisely as I had seen him do before; but as I became engrossed in the game his system changed. Suddenly I became aware that I had met my equal; nay, more—that this man was a positive genius at cards. I do not know whether it was anything but skill helped on by luck, or if there was trickery as well. As note after note of my money—*your* money, Lucienne—was paid over to him I lost my head. The six thousand francs had long been lost and won, and still we played on—he, cool and contemptuous; I like the madman that I was—till at last I had nothing to stake, and in desperation I threw my watch upon the table. Gilbert pushed it back to me with a smile that made me long to kill him. 'I don't want that, you poor fool!' he said.

"I sprang to my feet, and said something that showed I knew who he was outside that devil's den. For a moment his face changed; then, springing to his feet, he grasped my wrists as in a vise.

"'You had better forget me!' he hissed. 'For sure as we stand here, if ever my name passes your lips in connection with this place you are a dead man.'

"He went out and left me—ruined. I had that morning received your father's letter asking for money to buy a house in the country, and I had counted on the winnings of that night to stave off disaster. You know the rest, Lucienne; only had it not been for this last misfortune I might have had courage at least to stay and face the punishment I so richly deserved."

Lucienne sighed deeply, and then continued her questioning:

"And you are sure that he knew who you were?"

"Absolutely certain."

"Then he was aware whose money he won?"

"Yes."

"And yet he dares to take my hand—dares even to sit at our table! Oh, what can I call him?" Then another idea struck her. "In other things, what sort of a man is he?" she asked.

But Lozares had already told the worst. The demon of gold seemed to have possessed the soul of Gilbert, ousting all other passions; only to gratify his greed, he did not hesitate to sacrifice every consideration of honesty, and, indeed, of honour.

"But he is clever over it all," concluded Lozares. "Nothing escapes him; and his plans are so well laid that they defy detection—that is, so long as his luck does not desert him. As a banker, his conduct was considered above reproach. His colleagues esteemed him highly."

"How awful!" groaned Lucienne. "Oh, how awful!"

At the sight of her distress, Lozares began to reproach himself aloud for having brought this fresh trouble upon her.

"No, Pedro, you need not regret what has happened," she said. "In this case it is better to know the dreadful truth than to remain in ignorance of it."

"Nevertheless, it is another sorrow that I have brought into your life," replied Lozares, sadly. "And, after all you have done for me, I should be a shameless brute, worse even than

Gilbert, if I did not feel twenty times over the smallest pain that is inflicted on you."

And, despite all Lucienne could say, she left him unconsoled for what had happened.

CHAPTER XVI

MISGIVINGS

THE more Lucienne dwelt on the knowledge that had come to her in so strange a manner, the greater were the difficulties that she saw before her. At first she had thought only of the personal horror and antipathy that the revelation of her brother-in-law's true character had raised in her mind, and she prayed that God would give her strength to forgive him the part he had taken in her family's ruin. Then it suddenly came to her that her husband's fortune was also in this man's hands; and what trust could be placed in a gambler who apparently had no conscience to check his actions when it came to making money?

To tell Louise what she had learned was naturally out of the question. Monsieur and Madame Mauvoisin would not listen to a word against their son-in-law; and, unless Lozares

could be brought forward to testify to his story, why should her word be believed against De Charolles'? Even if Lozares were able to tell the story himself, what good would it do? Her parents' innocence of all participation in the spending of her fortune would indeed be proved, but at what a price! Anger, discord, and sorrow, which would make a breach in the Mauvoisin family that nothing could ever heal.

Raoul was the only person to whom it would be possible to reveal her secret, yet for many reasons she shrank from telling him what she knew. A great change had come over him during the past months; but, even so, could she trust him with the knowledge of Lozares' whereabouts? Her influence with him was increasing daily, and she hesitated to do anything that might shake his trust in her. Fortunately, it was not necessary to act at once; and, as they were going to leave Paris in a few days, she decided to keep her own counsel for the present, and to watch for an opportunity of speaking during the six weeks alone with her husband at Croisic.

It was the first time since their honeymoon that the Raoul Mauvoisins had left Paris

together. Usually the whole family went in a party to some watering place; but this year Madame de Charolles was advised to go to Cauterêts; and, as her husband could not accompany her, her parents went with her in his place. Raoul, however, had set his heart on spending the summer by the sea; and it was an example of his growing independence that he resisted his mother's request, and kept to his own plan, despite her wish that he, and therefore necessarily Lucienne, should travel with them all to Cauterêts.

To Lucienne's surprise, she learned that her old friends in the Luxembourg were following the example of all well-to-do Parisians, and were going for some weeks into the country. She had unconsciously counted on Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille's continuing to visit Lozares during her absence at Croisic; for she had not thought that the modest little household could well bear the expense of a country holiday. Mademoiselle Fanny, on the other hand, had made all arrangements for Pedro's comfort during the absence of his benefactress; and Lucienne's mind could be at rest so far as he was concerned.

CHAPTER XVII

DE CHAROLLES COMES AND GOES

THREE weeks of the Raoul Mauvoisins' stay at Croisic had passed; and, in spite of all that was on her mind, Lucienne had benefited by the enforced rest and the fresh breezes of the sea. No opportunity had yet presented itself which would have enabled her to tell Raoul of her discovery concerning M. de Charolles; and although, thinking calmly over it, she saw that such a declaration would eventually be necessary, she did not feel that her husband could as yet be induced to act with mercy and discretion; and she shrank from breaking in upon the peace which, alas! she was not destined to enjoy for long.

One morning, as they sat at breakfast, the omnibus, which had been sent to meet the early train, drove up as usual to the hotel. A moment later the hall porter opened the dining-

room door and beckoned a waiter to him. The message he gave was to the effect that a gentleman had arrived and was asking for Monsieur and Madame Mauvoisin. The meal was nearly over, and, with an expression of wonder as to who the unexpected visitor could be, Raoul rose from the table and accompanied Lucienne to the drawing-room.

"Frédéric! What on earth brings you here?" Lucienne's cry of horror and amazement was drowned in the words of her husband's exclamation; for the visitor was none other than De Charolles.

"What a welcome, when I have travelled all the way from Paris on purpose to enjoy your company!" laughed the newcomer, who appeared to be in the best of spirits. "What brings me here? Well, what has brought yourself, may I ask?"

"I?" Raoul was only half serious as he replied. "Oh, I came for my health!"

De Charolles laughed again, showing the pointed white teeth which to Lucienne always looked cruel and wolfish.

"Judging from appearances, then, the place must be unrivalled as a health resort. I was

certainly right to come here for the few days that I can spare from business. Cauterêts is so far," he added as an after-thought.

There was nothing in this explanation to arouse suspicion as to any ulterior motive for this visit; yet, from the first, some instinct told Lucienne that their visitor was anxious to secure a tête-à-tête with Raoul, but that he hesitated to ask her to leave them alone together. A plea of business would have served his purpose in any ordinary case; but Lucienne could only think that his secret was so important that he dared not even let her guess at its existence, fearing that, with the curiosity and pertinacity for which women are famous, she would persuade Raoul to tell her.

They had long arranged to make an excursion, before their departure, to the light-house that stands at the entrance of the bay; and Raoul was congratulating himself, as he dressed for dinner, that De Charolles could now accompany them upon their trip. Raoul was in his element on occasions such as this expedition. During his stay at Croisic he had made friends with a number of people, whom he now invited to join in his day's enjoyment.

He had hired a small steam yacht to convey the whole party, numbering twenty-eight or thirty persons; and, had the weather also been ordered, it could not have been more perfect. The sea was like a crystal mirror under an unbroken expanse of blue sky. The only ripples on its surface were those that were made by the boat itself as it steamed along the bay toward the lighthouse, which stands on a rocky island that is invisible at high water.

Here it was that the luncheon was served; and by the time it was fully over, and the mechanical working of the light had been duly inspected, the weather was found to have changed, and the captain of the yacht sent word to Raoul that it would be advisable to make as little further delay as possible. Looking down from above, it seemed a perilous moment when the passengers had to loose their hold of the iron ladder and let themselves down into the little boat that was waiting for them. The host and hostess, with De Charolles and one other man, were the last to be taken off. The guest was the first to go down to the boat, followed by Raoul.

"You need not be afraid," he said to

Lucienne, who seemed to be nervous even after watching the safe descent of all the other ladies. "I will be ready to catch you in the boat. Follow me now; and remember, if you do happen to slip, I shall not let you fall."

She smiled at him, and, as soon as his head had disappeared over the edge of the plateau, prepared to carry out his directions. She let herself down carefully, clinging to the iron rungs. Her feet were safe upon the ladder, and she was about to feel for the second step, when, without the slightest warning, De Charolles sprang off the door ledge, swinging himself past her with a hasty word of warning.

"Take care, Lucienne! I am coming!"

As he spoke he dropped into her place in the boat, which, with one dexterous push, he sent flying from the foot of the ladder; so that, before Raoul and the two sailors had recovered from their stupefaction, they found themselves halfway to the steamer.

"Turn, men—turn!" said Raoul, standing up in his place and stretching out his arms as though he could steady the slender, swaying figure that clung in a paroxysm of terror to the ladder far above him.

"Sit down, Raoul!" De Charolles dragged his brother-in-law into the boat.

"A hundred francs," cried Raoul, "to anyone who will hold the lady safe until the boat can reach her."

Instantly one of the sailors was in the water swimming toward the ladder.

"Now to the steamer!" cried the Count. But Raoul turned upon him.

"Back to the lighthouse!" he roared. "I am master. What do you mean? Do you want to kill her?"

De Charolles bent over and said something in his brother-in-law's ear, and at the same moment a triumphant cry from the sailor above told them that Lucienne was safe.

"Hold on, little lady!" called the sailor, as he clambered up the steps and put his wet arm about her waist. "Don't look down; it will only make you giddy. You are quite safe now."

The ordeal was over. But Lucienne's anguish was no less than it had been in the moment of peril. It came to her that this had been no mere accident; it was part of the plot she had been trying to frustrate. So far she

had been successful in keeping her husband out of the clutches of his brother-in-law; but De Charolles, not to be foiled, resorted to this cowardly and dangerous trick.

The whole party were waiting anxiously for her on the steamer, but she had eyes for no one except Raoul. But even at this moment, when she was just restored to him, she saw and felt that something else was filling his mind. In the short space of time since they had parted, his whole appearance had changed. He spoke and moved like a man in a dream. The others thought that it was her danger that made him look so altered and so pre-occupied, but Lucienne knew better. Yes, she knew that De Charolles had succeeded in his plan; and, whatever his secret was, he had revealed it to Raoul during the time that her accident had left them alone together. And her fears were only increased when the next morning she was greeted with the news that De Charolles had returned to Paris by the night train.

CHAPTER XVIII

MYSTERY

RAOUL spent the day following De Charolles' departure in lounging about the pier. There was evidently something on his mind; but, as he said nothing about it, Lucienne did not question him, only her foreboding of evil became more insistent. Once she suggested gently that he should go and take his daily swim, but he answered her pettishly:

"I am tired of bathing—in fact, I am sick of Croisic and of the sea altogether. We had better leave here."

Lucienne turned her head away to hide the tears that she could not control. Raoul was evidently determined to keep his secret, and both of them were relieved when some friends came up and joined them. In the course of conversation, Raoul casually remarked that they were obliged to leave Croisic sooner than

they had intended; and during the day Lucienne heard him repeating this to others, and even mentioning that they were to start for home the next morning.

The Raoul Mauvoisins were the first of the family to return to Paris; but the party from Cauterêts soon followed their example. And before long Lucienne found herself living the life she had led before their departure for Croisic, only the spectre which had haunted her ever since that fateful visit to Lozares had grown so menacing that it now overshadowed all her other trials and troubles. But she had to bear her burden alone—alone except for the one unfailing Friend, who has promised from all ages that they who come to Him labouring and heavy burdened, He will refresh. So Lucienne looked to God, and prayed and waited.

By September most of their friends had returned to town, and invitations began to come to the Mauvoisins for dinners and other entertainments. Formerly Raoul had been unwilling ever to refuse an invitation, and Lucienne had often wished that he was less indefatigable in his search for amusement. But

now such a change had come over him that refusals were sent more often than acceptances; Lucienne was quite surprised when he told her that he wished to accept an invitation to dinner sent to them by Monsieur and Madame Gerard, who since returning from Russia had taken up their abode in a charming house a short distance outside of Paris. A party of nearly forty of their most intimate friends had been asked to dinner; and the remainder of their acquaintances were bidden to join them only in the evening, to admire all the beautiful things they had brought with them from their foreign home, and to listen to the music which would be provided for their enjoyment.

Raoul and Lucienne were almost the last of the more privileged band to arrive; and although Lucienne had donned her festive apparel with a heavy heart, merely standing passively whilst her maid adorned her, the effect produced could not have been better. Her stately figure, peculiar style of beauty, was so enhanced by the way she was dressed that, when she entered the drawing-room where Madame Gerard and her guests were as-

sembled, there was a sudden pause in the conversation, quickly followed by a murmur of admiration from at least half of those present.

Lucienne Mauvoisin was unconscious alike of the sensation her appearance had caused and of the fuel that this sensation had added to the fire of Madame de Charolles' jealousy of her. Her thoughts were taken up with Raoul, for he sat in full view of her at the brilliantly lighted table. She could not help noticing how much he had altered during the past few months. It seemed as though the time at Croisic, instead of doing him good, had done him positive harm. Afterward, when the meal was over and the guests had returned to the drawing-room, he did not join in the general conversation, but stood apart from the others, his eyes seeking the door restlessly as each newcomer was announced. Many of Madame Gerard's guests were strangers to Lucienne, so she could not even guess who it was that her husband was expecting; but before very long she saw, by the sudden change of his expression, not only that the guest, whoever he might be, had arrived, but also that his advent was anything but welcome to Raoul.

Following the direction in which he was looking, she saw a small dark man approaching their hostess, and bowing low before her. This done, and having received a few gracious words of greeting from her, he moved aside and stood looking round him uncertainly. It was evident that he was a stranger not only to Lucienne, but to most of his fellow-guests. For a few moments no one spoke to him; then Lucienne saw De Charolles advance and greet him coldly, yet as an acquaintance.

De Charolles and his friend were gradually approaching the door; and, turning to her neighbour, Lucienne questioned her impulsively.

"Do you know that man to whom my brother-in-law is speaking?" she asked.

"No, Madame. I have never seen him before. The Gerards must have made his acquaintance when they were abroad, for he does not seem to know anyone here excepting M. de Charolles."

A movement among the guests allowed Lucienne to change her place; and again she asked the same question, receiving in reply almost the same answer.

From the place where she now stood she could see Raoul; he was standing somewhat in the shadow, and Lucienne was quite sure that he had braced himself to face some cruel ordeal. The stranger and De Charolles had by this time reached the door, and Lucienne saw the latter turn and make a slight but decided sign to Raoul. No one but a close observer could have connected this sign with Raoul's quick movement; but Lucienne saw he was obeying some prearranged signal, and she determined that he should not leave the room without knowing that she was aware of his absence. It was easy now for her to slip through the crowd unnoticed, and at the door she waited for her husband.

"Where are you going?" she asked, in a tone that she tried to make unconcerned.

Raoul glanced at her in surprise, and she caught the unutterable sadness that lay in the depths of his eyes.

"We are going to smoke."

She started at the answer to her question; and, turning quickly, she came face to face with her brother-in-law. Their eyes met, and Lucienne could see that, under his dark

moustache, De Charolles' lips were closed resolutely. If he was steeling himself against any appeal, it was unnecessary. Ignoring his existence, she laid her hand on her husband's arm.

"Don't smoke too much, dear!" she said. "You know it is not good for you."

"Oh, it will do me no harm!" he replied half impatiently, yet her ears caught the almost hopeless cadence in his voice.

"Come on, Raoul!" called De Charolles. "We are waiting for you."

Raoul moved away, evidently unwilling, yet apparently unable to refuse; and Lucienne was left standing in the doorway all alone.

CHAPTER XIX

THE STRANGER

Raoul followed De Charolles through several rooms that opened one from the other, until at length they reached a smaller apartment, which was filled with clouds of blue smoke curling upward from the cigars and cigarettes of the ten or twelve guests who had already sought its open doors. Lucienne watched them disappear. The stranger was not in sight, and she concluded therefore that he, too, had gone to the smoking-room.

The drawing-rooms by this time were nearly full; and, in spite of open windows, the heat was intense. By ten o'clock everyone had arrived; and the refreshing breezes that stole in from behind the silken curtains were ruthlessly shut out, as the music was beginning.

Lucienne looked around anxiously for Raoul. Other men who had gone to smoke

after dinner had come back, but of her husband and his companions there was no sign. Finally she decided to go in search of him. She had often visited Madame Gerard, and knew her way about the house perfectly; so that when, under cover of a brilliant sonata which was being played by a well-known pianist, she managed to glide into the shadow of the portière that hung close beside her, she was at no loss where to go. Luckily for the success of her plans, the attendants had for the moment deserted the cloak-room; and, feeling like a thief, she passed into the semi-darkness, and seized a long, dark-coloured cloak that was lying on a chair. This completely covered her white gown, so that, a shadow amongst shadows, she could go unseen through the now deserted rooms.

Even the smoking-room was empty; and, going farther, she entered the library, off which she knew there was an ante-room with a glass door opening on the terrace. Unlatching this door, she went cautiously out into the darkness. The night air struck her sharply after the heat of the drawing-room, and she drew her cloak more closely round her. She passed along the

terrace, protected herself by the surrounding darkness, yet able to see clearly into the empty rooms. Neither De Charolles, nor the stranger, nor Raoul himself was anywhere to be seen.

"My God, my God, where have they taken him?" she murmured under her breath, as, having reached the last window, she realised that her search was in vain. But, as though in answer to her cry, the remembrance came to her of a small room opening off the farther side of the library, which Monsieur Gerard had fitted up for his botanical studies. It was a small apartment, barely furnished, and its window opened down to the ground.

With noiseless tread, Lucienne retraced her footsteps. Something told her that she had at last run her quarry to earth; but, passing round the pillar which supported the veranda, she saw that a pair of heavy curtains were drawn together across the window, which was carefully closed. No sound was to be heard; but a single ray of light struggled through the curtains, showing that, in all probability, the room was occupied.

Suddenly there was a crash as though a chair

or table had been overturned, and immediately two voices were raised in altercation. One of the speakers she recognised as being De Charolles; the other voice she more than guessed belonged to the stranger. At that moment she would have given all she possessed to see through the curtain that obstructed her view. The voices inside went on. They were raised angrily; and, taking advantage of this, Lucienne stretched her hand to where the fastening lay on the inside of the window against which she was leaning. It was a vain hope that prompted the movement, for everything was secure. The single narrow line of light falling there showed that there was a crack in the glass across one corner of the window. But what use was that to her? Her hand fell to her side, and as it did so a new ray of hope was born. Could she—dared she—cut across this broken triangle with the diamond at her wrist on which the light had played for an instant? Inside, the talking still went on; there was a shuffling of feet, a rearrangement of the furniture, and under cover of this she bravely pressed the diamond to the glass.

The noise it made sounded like thunder in her ears, and she could not believe that she was unheard.

Very gently she loosened the smaller triangle from the single piece of wood that held it. She was wonderfully skilful; for not only did she escape without a scratch, but her task was finished even more noiselessly than it had been begun. There was space enough for her bare arm to pass in, and cautiously she seized the border of the curtain and drew it slightly toward her. There were three men in the room, which had been laid out for card playing. All the tables but one were now deserted, and the trio she sought were seated round this one. It was as Lucienne had foreseen. The stranger whom Raoul had followed from the drawing-room was seated sideways to the window and opposite Raoul, whose face was drawn and ghastly white. His opponent was livid with rage. De Charolles alone was smiling, and the words of Lozares came back to the hidden watcher. Truly it was a diabolic smile.

For a moment or two the game went on in silence; then the stranger pushed aside the last

card that Raoul had played. Diving into his pocket he pulled out a bundle of bank notes, and, counting them over, flung a number of them on the table. Raoul took them up without saying a word, and Lucienne saw that the muscles of his face were tense and rigid. There was certainly nothing of the triumphant victor about him.

The play began again, and presently a second bundle of notes followed the first into Raoul's pocket. But this repeated misfortune was too much for the stranger to bear. He sprang to his feet and pushed the table from him.

"I will not have any more of this!" he cried, angrily. "And, what is more, I shall be revenged for what has been done this evening."

"What do you mean?" returned De Charolles. "Whom do you mean to threaten? You had better look to yourself."

He lowered his voice, and Lucienne heard no more. Whatever was said had the desired effect, for the stranger was silent, and turned with a sullen shrug to the door. Then Raoul rose from his place, and the three men went out together. Before Lucienne had time to move

she heard them pass through the library and the anteroom; and, without any warning, they re-appeared on the terrace close beside her. They had come out through the door that she herself had left open, and she could only shrink back into the shadow, clinging to the stone pillar that sheltered her from view.

"Go straight on." It was De Charolles who spoke in an undertone. "You will find the gate there to the left."

"All right."

The stranger stepped on to the gravel and passed out into the darkness, without even a parting word to his companions. The brothers-in-law stood for a moment on the threshold; then De Charolles went out to the terrace, and Raoul followed him. They were evidently going back that way to the smoking-room.

"If every day could be like this!" De Charolles' voice expressed the liveliest satisfaction.

"One day is as bad as another to me," returned Raoul.

"Nonsense!" retorted the other. "Can't you have a little self-restraint?"

"Self-restraint!" burst out Raoul. "If I did

not restrain myself almost beyond endurance I should fling a whole pack of cards in your face before everyone rather than sit down again with one of your dupes."

"Pray do so, then," replied De Charolles in tones of icy politeness. "You will merely be proclaiming your sister's ruin to the world. On the other hand, if we can go on as we are, a few nights more like this one may save her. Remember I ask nothing in my own name."

"If it lasts much longer it will kill me," groaned Raoul.

"Bah, what folly! You make me laugh when you speak like that."

Their voices died away, and the crunching of the gravel under their feet in the distance told the listener that she was free. Stealing back to the library, she threw her borrowed wrap aside; and, luck again favouring her, she managed to mingle in the crowd that was gathered round the door of the room where the concert was still going on.

"What a splendid voice!" said someone in her ear as a celebrated baritone stepped from the platform.

"Yes, indeed," said Lucienne, mechanically,

answering by instinct a remark she had hardly heard.

Then, after a short pause, the opening bars of another song were played upon the piano. From where Lucienne sat she could not see the performers, but she knew the air, and it brought her back with a shock to the horror of the evening. Oh, the mockery of it all! Madame de Charolles, beautifully dressed, smiling in gracious thanks for the applause that greeted her appearance, stepped upon the platform, with her music in her hand. Her voice rose clear and true, vibrating through the room, repeating in tragic tones the words that, had she but known what Lucienne knew, might have been wrung from her in deadliest earnest:—

"A mystery.
It is a hellish mystery.
I cannot understand it;
I cannot defend myself against it.
And my heart beats high with fear."

Lucienne closed her eyes and struggled to maintain her self-control. Her sister-in-law had done little enough to win her liking, yet at that moment she yearned toward her, pitying

her from the depths of her heart. The concert was drawing to a close; a part song arranged for several voices was the last item, and Lucienne wondered vaguely if she could sit through it all. Her head was swimming, the room began to turn around. She clasped the arms of her chair, counting the moments until she would be free to move. At last the music ceased, and, coming to herself with a start, she found her husband standing by her.

"I have been looking for you everywhere," he said, but his voice sounded faint and far away. "I did not know you had left the other room."

She stood up with an effort, but she could not speak.

"What is the matter, dear?" he asked anxiously. "Your face is flushed—"

"Take me home, Raoul," she murmured. "I feel so ill!"

"The heat of these rooms has been too much for you. Lean on my arm and let us go. The carriage is waiting."

He led her out, and wrapped her tenderly in her cloak. She was clinging to him and could hardly stand. He lifted her into the

carriage and told the coachman to drive home quickly.

"How are you feeling, dear?" he asked. "What can I do for you?"

"Open the window," she said, faintly. "I cannot breathe."

He did her bidding, and for a moment the cool night air seemed to revive her, but soon she began to shiver.

"How cold it is!" she said.

He laid his hand on hers, and found it burning hot.

"Cold?" he said, drawing up the window again. "You must be feverish. It was suffocating in those rooms."

"No, no!" she cried, wildly. "It was cold—cold and dark—cold—"

But even as she spoke her head fell against his shoulder, and he saw that she had fainted away.

CHAPTER XX

ILLNESS

When Lucienne re-opened her eyes, she was lying in her own room. The servants had been terrified at the sight of their master carrying his inanimate burden. One had gone hastily for the doctor, a second lit the fire, while a third helped to administer the remedies that were at hand. They chafed her hands and feet, and tried vainly to press a few drops of brandy through the clenched teeth. At last she stirred faintly, and spoke in a feeble voice.

"Where am I?"

"You are at home, dear," answered her husband, holding her hand in his own. "Look at me! There, now! Don't you know your own room?"

"Who is speaking?" she asked, turning her head on the pillow and gazing vacantly at him.

"Lucienne! It is I—Raoul." He bent

anxiously over her, murmuring under his breath: "Is it possible that she does not know me?"

"Don't shut the door!" she cried. "They have gone out by it. Oh!"—her voice rose to a discordant wail—"oh, they are killing him, killing him! For he said, 'If this goes on it will kill me.' "

Raoul dropped her hand and sat as one turned to stone. Feeling herself free from his restraining clasp, Lucienne sat up in the bed, panting for breath, her face flushed, her hair hanging in disorder about her.

"She must lie down," whispered the frightened maid. "Make her lie down, sir, or she will catch her death of cold."

"Cold!" repeated Lucienne. "Oh, yes, it was very cold out on the terrace!"

"She is raving," said the maid, trying vainly to make her lie down.

"Go away!" said Raoul, in a low voice.

"But, sir—" expostulated the maid.

"Go!" he repeated sternly. "I will see to her; if she wants you, I will call."

His tone was peremptory, and the woman dared not disobey him.

Left alone, he insisted quietly though firmly on Lucienne lying down; then he drew up the blankets and held them over her. She did not resist him, but sighed deeply and lay still. Soon, however, she began to speak again.

"You were right, Lozares," she murmured. "You said he was a gambler."

Raoul raised his head quickly, and met his wife's gaze turned full upon him.

"Will you do something for me, sir?" she pleaded. "There is a knife sticking into me here"—she placed her hands upon her chest. "Please pull it out—it is so painful!"

Raoul groaned in anguish.

"Lucienne," he said, taking her hands and speaking very distinctly. "Raoul is very much to be pitied."

"To be pitied!" she repeated. "Yes, I know it. But why do they go on singing and laughing? No one is doing anything to help him." Once again she sat up in bed. "Let us go to him."

"No," returned Raoul, firmly. "You must lie down. If you remain still, I promise he will come to you."

Just as he had persuaded her to keep still,

the doctor was announced; and, after examining his patient, he found that she was suffering from an acute attack of pleurisy, with high fever.

"She has caught a severe cold," he said; "but that is not enough to account for the excitable state she is in. She must have had a shock of some kind as well."

"You are right," said Raoul—"at least, so I gather from what my wife has been saying in her delirium."

The doctor wrote out two prescriptions, which were handed to the servant; then, turning to Raoul, he asked whether he had taken any steps to procure a nurse. The patient was quiet now, and seemed to be sleeping.

"When she wakes, is it likely that she will be delirious?" asked Raoul, before answering the doctor's question.

"Probably—at least, at intervals."

"Then I think it would be better to have someone besides her maid."

"Most decidedly," replied the doctor. "Shall I send a nurse from the hospital?"

Raoul hesitated for a moment.

"Can you recommend a truly reliable person?" he asked.

The doctor nodded thoughtfully.

"I understand," he said. "A nursing Sister is what you want."

"Yes, certainly," said Raoul, eagerly. "It will be most kind if you will send one to us."

A few hours later a Bon Secours Sister was installed in charge of the case. But, even so, Raoul would not leave his wife's bedside; and when, worn out by all that he had gone through, he felt himself falling asleep, he made the Sister promise to wake him if his wife began to rave.

Presently the footman knocked at the door, and insisted on delivering a message to his master.

"M. de Charolles is outside," whispered the man, when Raoul had aroused himself sufficiently to listen. "I told him that Madame was ill and that you were with her, sir; but he says he must see you, all the same."

"Give me a piece of paper."

The man had never before heard his master speak in so stern a voice, and he gave him what he asked without delay.

"It is useless for you to wait," he wrote. "I cannot see you now; and as soon as I can do so, I will let you know. Can you not leave me in peace when I am overwhelmed by my own troubles?"

He sealed the note and handed it to the servant.

"That is the answer," he said shortly. "Give it to M. de Charolles." And as the man left the room Raoul locked the door and laid the key upon the table.

At that moment Lucienne sat up in bed and began to gaze wildly about.

"Another attack of fever is coming on," whispered the nun.

Raoul looked quickly toward the bed, then to the nurse, hesitating for a moment, and then speaking quickly and low.

"Sister," he said, "I am going to be perfectly open with you. I should like to be left alone with my wife. You will forgive me for asking this?"

"I am here to be a help and not a hindrance," the nun replied, with a smile. "You have only to tell me what you wish, and if I can I will do it. But please remember that it is of the utmost

importance that the patient should not be allowed to throw off the blankets; everything depends upon her not catching further cold."

"I will take care," said Raoul, as he held open the door for her.

Lucienne was moaning piteously and turning from side to side.

"What is it, dear?" he said tenderly.

"Take the band out of my hair," she begged. "And, oh, do let us go home! The light—the glare—the music! Oh, my heart is breaking!"

"Lucienne, tell me what is making you so unhappy?" he asked; but she would not answer; only when he repeated his question, she murmured brokenly:

"I have kept your secret, Lozares; but you do not know how heavy the burden is that you have laid upon me."

Raoul's expression changed. It was the second time she had spoken of this man.

"Lozares is far away, dear," he said; "he cannot hear what you are saying."

But she did not heed him, and struggled to get up.

"Pedro, Pedro!" she cried agonisingly. "His name is not Gilbert: it is Frédéric."

"Gilbert!" exclaimed Raoul, more and more bewildered. "But that is the name."

"The name?" she repeated. "How many names has he?" Then, without pausing for an answer, she went on: "Get up, Pedro, and come with me. We must make him give up the money that he won so unfairly. It is mine. They have made me suffer too much for its loss for me to be afraid. What! you will not come? Oh, I forgot! He cannot come—his leg is broken. He is covered with blood." And she fell back shuddering on her pillows. "I understand. We cannot move, either of us. We are both dead."

"Lucienne, Lucienne, you must not say that!" cried Raoul. "Lie quiet now and rest. You must try to get well for my sake—for the sake of those who love you—your father and—"

"Hush! hush!" she said, rousing herself again. "You must not call my father. What would happen if he saw me kneeling here at Pedro's feet?"

"Always that accursed name!" muttered Raoul through his teeth. "What does it mean?"

"Raoul, Raoul!" said Lucienne. "He is

breaking my heart. No, do not blame him. Only pity him. He is playing cards with the stranger—the stranger who has hell in his eyes." Then she turned and clung to her husband. "Send him away. Don't let him touch me. Don't let him call me his sister. I know he is Louise's husband; but, oh, it was he who stole my fortune!"

"Lucienne," said her husband, trying hard to control his voice, "Frédéric has nothing to do with you or your fortune."

"I know you think so, but that is our secret."

"Tell it to me, then."

"It was Pedro that staked the money, you know—"

"And Frédéric de Charolles won it!" interrupted Raoul, a ray of understanding coming suddenly to him. He sprang to his feet. "When did he do that? Tell me all—when and where?"

Unconsciously Raoul's voice rose and sounded menacing in the poor dulled ears.

"Help, help!" she cried in sudden alarm. "I am afraid of this man."

The nun, hearing her patient's voice raised,

now opened the door and asked if she was wanted.

"No, Sister," replied Raoul; but she came forward, and began to prepare the medicine that the doctor had ordered.

"She is worn out," she said, looking down at the frail white face. "She cannot go on like this. She must take this medicine. It will soothe her for the time at least."

Lucienne took the dose without protest, and it began immediately to have effect.

"You ought to go and rest yourself," whispered the nun to Raoul. "She will be quiet now, and later she may need you."

He hesitated for a moment; but the regular, laboured breathing of Lucienne assured him that for the present she would say no more, and he went to his room.

It was easy for the nun to advise him to sleep, but he could not close his eyes. His head was in a whirl of conflicting thoughts. Were Lucienne's words merely the ravings of a mind unhinged by fever, or had they some foundation in reality? One thing was clear to him: Lucienne had in some mysterious manner seen him gambling at the Gerards in company with

De Charolles; but was her accusation against this latter as regarded her own fortune in any way justified? What could she possibly know of De Charolles' affairs in the past?

"I ought to have confided in her," he muttered to himself. "It is more difficult to deceive a woman than a man, and I might have saved myself much if I had insisted on telling her all. God knows what she has found out."

It was useless to continue such thoughts as these, especially as there were duties awaiting him. His mother was unaware of Lucienne's sudden illness, and he could not delay further in letting her know of it. It did not take long to write her a few lines; but the second letter, that was of equal importance, could not be so hastily dispatched. Taking a sheet of paper from his desk, he dipped his pen in the ink resolutely and wrote the date. Then, however, he paused, frowning and biting his penholder in indecision. Finally, he took a fresh supply of ink and wrote the one word:

"Madame,—"

Again he paused and looked at his handiwork. There was a movement in the

next room—a faint moan. His face softened at the sound; and, seizing the paper, he tore it across and threw it from him. Taking up another sheet, he began to write again:

"My dear Mother,—"

Evidently this pleased him little better than his first attempt.

"Well, it can't be helped," he muttered. "It means nothing, and certainly it is more seemly than the other."

After a moment's hesitation he went on quickly with his letter:

"Lucienne has caught cold, and will not be able to go to see you for a few days. Be not anxious about her. We hope she will be herself again in a short time.

"Believe me, your—"

He paused again. How could he finish his letter? How could he sign himself to the parents who were forbidden to enter the house that ought to have been a second home to them? He pondered for a long time; then, with a movement of impatience, he tore this second letter into ribbons, and dashed off a third note. This one he was determined should be the last:

"Madame Raoul Mauvoisin, being confined to the house for a few days by a cold, regrets that she will be unable to have the pleasure of visiting Monsieur and Madame de Barli. She begs that they will not be anxious on her account; and she will send them news of her progress each day until she is able, in person, to announce to them her complete recovery."

"There!" he said to himself, folding up the paper and thrusting it into an envelope. "That is what things have come to. A stranger would think I was writing to a tradesman. Well, it can't be helped."

He rang the bell and told the servant to take the note for Madame Mauvoisin to her house, and to put the other in the post.

"Remember," he said as the man went out, "no one but the nurse is to go into Madame's room under any pretext whatever—no one, remember."

CHAPTER XXI

RAOUL QUESTIONS

During the days that followed, Raoul was able to gather from Lucienne's incoherent words a more or less complete history of what her life had been since her marriage—the slights, the sufferings, the self-restraint, but more than all else the deep and lasting love that his wife had borne him. Of Lozares and his connection with De Charolles in the past he was still uninformed; and as Lucienne came back to full consciousness, it was impossible to question her in detail on a subject that would have excited her and renewed her fever.

At the end of three weeks the doctor pronounced her convalescent, and she was able to begin to occupy herself, thus freeing Raoul from his constant attendance upon her. It seemed, however, that the cloud that had hung over him so long deepened each time that he

went out; and at last Lucienne determined to put in force a resolution that she had made during the quiet days after her illness.

"Raoul," she said, as he sat by her one evening, silent and preoccupied as usual, "there is something on your mind, and I want you to tell me what it is."

Lucienne expected to receive an evasive answer, but to her surprise Raoul made no attempt at denial.

"You are quite right, Lucienne," he said sadly; "there is a heavy weight upon me that is crushing me to the very earth."

"My poor dear!" she said. "Can you not tell me what it is? Perhaps I could help you to bear it. I think God has spared my life that I may be some comfort to you in this trial that I have seen hanging over you for so long. Oh, dear Raoul, won't you trust me and tell me what it is?"

"I do trust you," replied Raoul; "and I am sorry that, up to this, I have allowed myself to be persuaded to keep this secret from you. But, first of all, Lucienne, tell me one thing. You ask for my confidence, you want me to be open with you, but have you not kept something

secret from me, too? Have you been open with me?"

Lucienne's pale cheeks flushed.

"What do you mean?" she questioned in a startled tone.

"You must not disturb yourself," he said, "or I will not let you talk any more. Remember, I am not finding fault with you; I only want to know why you have kept from me the fact of your intercourse with—"

"With whom?" The question burst from Lucienne's white lips, and Raoul answered in a whisper:

"With Pedro Lozares."

For a moment she was silent, lying back so still and white upon the cushions of her chair that he thought, with sudden fear, she had fainted, and he reached across to seize the bottle of smelling-salts that the nurse had left at her side. As he did so she put up her hand and held his in her own.

"Forgive me!" she murmured. "Had it been only you yourself, I should not have feared to trust you."

"Then it is true that you know where this man is—that you have seen him?"

She made a sign of affirmation, but she could not speak, and the tears began to trickle slowly down her cheeks.

"Don't cry, dear!" he said. "You know I am not angry with you. I only want to know the whole truth. How long is it since you have known his whereabouts?"

"Nearly a year."

"A year!"

Controlling herself, she told him how she had first discovered the fugitive's hiding-place and the state in which he was.

"Believe me," she said, "I would not have kept his secret if any restitution had been possible; but what good would it have done us all to drag him from his hiding-place, beggared, crippled, dying? It would only have hardened him; whilst as it is—oh, Raoul, if you knew how truly he repents you would not blame me!"

"Blame you!" He looked down at her, and in that moment he was prouder of her and loved her better than ever before. "Give me his address," he said gently. "I must go to see him."

He handed her a pencil and a piece of paper, and she wrote down what he asked.

"And you really think one can believe what the scoundrel says?"

"Yes, I am sure of it," she answered firmly. "He is sincerely sorry, and I do not think anything would make Pedro Lozares deceive me now."

"Very well. There is no use in putting it off," said Raoul. "I may as well go to see him at once."

"Promise me not to be too severe," she pleaded, as he moved to go.

And, looking down upon her in her weakness and her fragile beauty, he kissed her tenderly, and promised to do as she wished.

On reaching the outer door of the apartment, Raoul paused for a moment as though a thought had struck him; and, putting down his hat, he went slowly back to his wife's room.

"No, I have not started yet," he said in answer to her look of surprise. "I want to ask you another question. It may be better that I should know all before I see Lozares. Am I right in thinking that he said something about De Charolles?"

"Who told you that?" cried Lucienne, breathlessly.

"Someone whose word you would find it very hard to disprove."

"I don't understand," said Lucienne. "I am sure I have been as silent as the grave, and have never told a single soul."

"Are you sure of that?" asked Raoul.

She gazed at him a moment in amazement, then a light broke in upon her.

"Ah, I understand!"

"No one heard your wanderings but myself," Raoul hastened to reassure her—"not even good Sister Claire."

"So you know all! How wonderful are God's ways, and how little use it is for us to plan and strive without Him! I have thought and thought how I could ever tell you, and now you know all."

"Perhaps not *all,*" replied her husband. "Remember, you were very incoherent."

"Then do you wish me to tell it to you again?"

"Yes, dear!"

" I spoke of De Charolles?"

"Yes, several times. It is about him that I want to question Lozares. Is it really the case that your fortune passed into his hands?"

"Not all of it, but a great part."

"And he knows it?"

She bowed her head. Then, as Raoul remained silent, absorbed in thought, Lucienne questioned him further.

"What else did I say?"

"You told of what occurred at Madame Gerard's party."

"Then you know that I saw all?"

Raoul sighed deeply, and Lucienne moved nearer to him.

"For your own sake," she pleaded, "free yourself from that man's influence. He treats you as a tool—uses you to pander to his passions."

"Stop, dear! I am less weak than you think—less weak and more unfortunate. But, as you know so much, I had better tell you all. When a man imagines himself a financial genius he plays with millions as a child plays with a handful of sand. Then, when he quits the broad, open road of honesty and follows crooked paths, there is but one thing before him."

"What!" she cried. "Do you mean that De Charolles' fortune is in danger?"

"Nay, more; I may say it is lost."

"Raoul!" There was no thought of self in the anguish that the single word betrayed. "Ruin, ruin on every side!"

"Yes, ruin," said Raoul in a choked voice; "and worse—dishonour."

"Will his bank cease payment?"

"Probably. Nothing is known for certain, as nothing is as yet absolutely lost, but everything is on the verge of ruin. Your fortune was lost by an outsider; ours—"

Lucienne was stunned by what she had heard. Her parents had taken the news of their loss hardly enough; but to the Mauvoisins, whose lives were lived for nothing but pleasure and display, such a blow would be absolutely crushing.

Raoul was shocked to see how terribly she took his revelations to heart, and he feared to have done her harm in her weak state.

"I ought not to have told you this so soon," he began; "but it was necessary that I should know as much as possible about Lozares—or, rather, about what he knew about Frédéric."

"You should have asked me sooner," said Lucienne. "I am quite well now."

"But how could you be so foolish as to run the risks you did that night?"

"How could I think of being prudent at such a time? Raoul, tell me who the stranger was?"

"An American, an adventurer, whom Frédéric had got hold of. He was always on the look out for partners for me. It was he who got the man his invitation from the Gerards."

"And—"

"He told me about his losses at Croisic, when—I need not go into such details."

"No, for I knew that, too. He told you of his impending ruin whilst he left me hanging on the ladder of the lighthouse."

"Don't speak of it!" cried Raoul, covering his eyes with his hand. "It comes back too vividly to me still."

"Tell me more," she pleaded.

"I promised him I would come back to Paris at once. He said I could be of use to him, but it was not until after our return that he unfolded his scheme. He knew that I was extraordinarily lucky at cards, and at the club I was considered a good player. The fool had faith in making money at cards; but if he

himself had been seen gambling his name would have been brought into discredit in banking circles. No one will ever know what I have gone through during these last months. I should never have undertaken to help him if it had not been for Louise and the credit of the family; but I have drunk the dregs of humiliation. And, then, the sickening excitement of those games, where the stakes were sometimes as high as two hundred thousand francs!"

"Oh, Raoul, how awful! And what happened when you lost?"

"I had to pay up. The Count advanced the money—borrowed it for the occasion. When I won—and certainly my luck has been marvellous—I paid my winnings in to him at once. He has been able in this way, and without exciting any suspicion (for no one guessed at our collaboration), to pay interest, amounting to seven or eight hundred thousand francs, on capital that he is supposed to have secured, but that is really lost. He did not intend to go on like this—his plan was merely to gain time until an expected rise in certain stocks set him on his feet again. If he had not assured me of

this, nothing would have persuaded me to help him; for no one but a lunatic could think that gambling could keep such a business as his afloat for any length of time. No, all he asked was to gain time. The rise did come as he had foretold, but he did not benefit by it as much as he anticipated. Another movement, however, is expected to take place any day now, and our salvation or our total ruin hangs on this—or, rather, on the possibility of keeping things afloat until the change comes; and every day this seems less possible. He has borrowed money right and left. There is not a bank in Paris that would advance him another franc. If he can hang on, things will right themselves. He will be able to meet his present liabilities; and as for the future, others at least will not have to suffer."

"My poor Raoul! Why did you not tell me this sooner?"

Raoul shook his head.

"You knew that I would have done all in my power to dissuade you?" went on Lucienne.

"Frédéric made me swear to keep it secret. It is extraordinary how he feared you."

"Does Louise suspect anything?"

"No. It is far better she should not. She will know all soon enough."

"And your parents?"

"No, indeed!"

"But, Raoul, is it right to keep your father in the dark? Could he not do something to help?"

Again he shook his head.

"No, Lucienne. From De Charolles' story, I think he has been made use of already, though he is no more aware of it than the other clients of the bank."

"Do you mean to say that they will be involved in his ruin?"

"I am afraid so."

"Oh, Raoul, Raoul, what can we do for them?"

"Nothing at present, except to keep this awful thing from them as long as possible. Ah, well! I have tried you too much already. Rest now whilst I go and visit that other robber."

"Don't be too hard on him. Tell him I sent you to him—that you are my messenger."

"Then," said Raoul, smiling sadly, "that means that I must be more than lenient with him."

"Raoul," said Lucienne very earnestly, as he rose to leave her, "up to this we have both been in the wrong. We have tried to bear our own burden unaided, without seeking help from each other, and we have been punished."

He took her quickly in his arms and held her to him.

"You are right as usual," he answered. "In the past we have suffered separately; but the troubles that I fear the future holds for us we will bear together."

He had told her to rest, but she was too much upset by all she had heard to be able to keep still; and she paced the room, her mind filled with anguish. Wherever she turned, sorrow seemed to be pressing upon her. For her own share in the Mauvoisins' fortune she gave no thought. She knew now that Raoul loved her, that he was at last really her own; and, with this knowledge, poverty was preferable to the lonely enjoyment of bodily comforts that had been hers for so long.

But her parents-in-law? Involuntarily her own father's words came back to her; and shudderingly she put her hands to her ears, as though she could thus shut out the remem-

brance of them: "May they be humbled to the dust! May I live to see that woman wounded to the heart by one of her own children!"

CHAPTER XXII

RAOUL SEES LOZARES

"Oh, my God," murmured Lucienne, "do not listen to such words! The pleadings of the sorrowful rise up to Heaven, not their curses. I also am sorrowful; and, by the sorrows of Thy Son, I beg for pardon and for mercy!"

Kneeling, she took out her Rosary and began to repeat the prayers that have carried comfort to so many aching hearts, till she, too, was comforted; and, although her tears still fell, the bitterest sting of sorrow had passed away.

"Well?" asked Lucienne, when Raoul returned. "Tell me about your visit to Lozares."

"My dear," he said gravely, "there are things that must be seen to be believed."

"Then you no longer blame me?"

He smiled as he made answer:

"I have promised to take you to see your

protégé as soon as you are able to face those stairs again."

"Oh, Raoul!" Her eyes were wet as she raised them to his. "That is your best, your real self!"

"Who could have imagined that the day would ever come when I should say this to you about the murderer of our happiness?" he went on.

"But our happiness is not dead," said Lucienne. "True, for a time it was threatened; but now, with God's help, we shall make it secure again."

"The foundations will need to be firm," returned Raoul, sighing; "for they will have much to withstand."

"Will the information that Pedro gave you be of use?" asked Lucienne.

"Yes, it will. He told me everything he knew about De Charolles; and I find that several of the partners with whom he made me play are well-known gamblers, who often played with him when he himself used to make the money fly over the green tables."

"Then what do you propose doing?"

"Nothing can be done now until we know

our fate. If we manage to escape complete ruin—and there is still hope, if we can tide over the next few days—Louise and the children must be provided for. Then I shall have to tell my father the state of the case, and we shall insist upon De Charolles' affairs going into liquidation. That will enable us to prevent any possibility of such things happening again —it will tie his hands completely. If it cannot be managed otherwise, Pedro must appear as witness against him."

"Will that be necessary?" she asked anxiously. "You know I promised to keep him safe from pursuit."

"There is time enough to see to that," replied Raoul. "If the worst comes, we can withdraw our charge against him, and that will insure his safety; so you need not worry about him. I shall not forget that he is your property. Certainly you paid for him dearly enough. But, Lucienne, I must own that I was really touched by him. No one who saw him could doubt for a moment the sincerity of his regret."

"How dear of you to say so!" exclaimed Lucienne.

"You see, I am not so bad," returned Raoul,

smiling. "But now I must go out again. I came straight back to you after seeing Lozares, as I knew you would be anxious to hear of the interview; still it is most important that I should go to the Bourse. De Charolles does not expect any change for another week; but one cannot judge how things are going on unless one is on the spot. I was nearly forgetting a piece of good news that I have for you. Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille and her sister have come home. They were to have stayed in the country till November; but Madame de Mantelon was not feeling well, so they thought it wiser to return. The negro paid Lozares a visit the day before yesterday."

"That is good news, indeed!" exclaimed Lucienne. "But, remember, they know nothing of Lozares' antecedents, and they must never be informed. To them, as to others, he is just Manuel, a poor Spaniard—nothing more."

"I am not so sure of their ignorance," answered Raoul; "but, in any case, they shall learn nothing from me."

"Did you say that José had been to see Pedro two days ago?"

"Yes, the day before yesterday," said Raoul.

"Then they must have been back for three or four days. Do you think it would be too soon for me to go to see them this afternoon?"

"You! But, Lucienne, you have not been out since your illness. You are not strong enough yet to pay visits."

"Only this one!" pleaded Lucienne. "It would not tire me in the least just to drive there and back again. There are no stairs or anything."

"Wrap yourself up well, then, dear; and I will call a carriage for you."

CHAPTER XXIII

RUIN

LUCIENNE soon reached the Rue d'Arras. Dismissing her maid, she crossed the courtyard and made her way to the quaint little house. As a rule, the ringing of the door bell brought out the griffon, barking fiercely; but to-day its sounds were merely echoed by a faint wail from the little dog, which was evidently shut up somewhere in the rear premises. The negro José stood in the shadow of the doorway, without a word.

What a sight was before her eyes as she entered the room of Madame de Mantelon! She could neither advance nor retire; her limbs were trembling under her, and, falling on her knees, she buried her face in the thick folds of the curtain to stifle the sound of tears she could not restrain.

Madame de Mantelon was lying on the bed,

propped up by pillows almost to a sitting posture. Everything around her was draped in white, and, late autumn though it was, the room seemed to be full of flowers. The beautiful, worn features had the stamp of death upon them; but here it was no dreadful thing, no enemy to be faced. On the contrary, the radiance of the dying countenance expressed the words to which a great saint gave voice long ago, "I never knew how sweet it was to die."

The flower-bedecked bed, the little altar with candles on it, told of the Divine Guest that had been there.

After a while Madame de Mantelon opened her eyes; then for the first time she became aware of Lucienne's presence.

"Ah, you!" she held out her arms. "How good of you to come! I had no time to send you word. It was so sudden at the last. But my sister thought of you—she did not forget you."

Madame de Mantelon beckoned feebly to Lucienne to approach. She could not speak, but her mind was perfectly clear; and she smiled sweetly as Lucienne obeyed, and, kneeling, kissed the nerveless hand.

"Dear, dear friend!" she said, and her voice was tremulous with tears. "Pray for me when you get to heaven, and pray, too, for those I love."

There was the faintest movement of assent, and then the dying woman looked towards her sister.

"You must not trouble yourself about me, my darling!" said Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille, speaking low but clearly. "Our parting will not be for long."

Then there was silence, broken in upon by sounds outside. José, who had been summoned while the Last Sacraments were being administered, quietly left the room. When he returned, he had to lay his hand on Lucienne's arm before he could attract her attention.

"Monsieur has sent for Madame," he whispered. "The footman, who is waiting outside, says the message is urgent."

Mademoiselle Rochefeuille had roused herself to listen, and, seeing that Lucienne was about to answer that she could not leave, she interposed.

"Go, my child!" she said. "It is your duty, if your husband needs you. God sent you to

us; and, remember, your coming has been a great consolation."

Lucienne took her hands.

"Promise me," she said earnestly, "promise me here, whilst she can still hear us, that you will always let me comfort and help you."

"That is an easy promise," replied Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille. "And I give it with all my heart. Kiss her," she added, as Lucienne rose to go; and the slight girlish figure bent over the bed, and the two sweet faces—one old and one young—were pressed together in a lingering caress.

"I will come back to-morrow," whispered Lucienne, trying to fight against the conviction that this was indeed the last time she should see her friend alive.

Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille repeated the word "To-morrow!" whilst Madame de Mantelon, looking upward with a smile, pointed silently to heaven.

On reaching home, Lucienne went straight to her husband's room. He was seated at the table, his arms outstretched before him, his head resting upon them; but at the sound of the opening door he sprang to his feet and came

toward her. Distress and anguish were written on either countenance.

"Do you know, Raoul, that Madame de Mantelon is dying? Or has something else happened also?" asked Lucienne.

"The worst!" groaned Raoul, again covering his face with his hands.

"I—I don't understand," stammered Lucienne. "You said that no change was expected in the markets for some days."

"True, but this came suddenly, and was absolutely unforeseen. Nothing can save us now, for the very securities have gone down instead of rising."

"And it means ruin?"

"Absolute."

Lucienne staggered back as though struck by a blow.

"Will it," she asked timidly, "will it affect you—us?"

"Yes—we shall be beggared."

"And your parents?"

"For them, as I have said, it is absolute ruin. My father trusted Frédéric so implicitly!"

"Is there any possibility of things being arranged without—"

"Without disgrace? No; it means both ruin and dishonour." Then, suddenly raising his voice, he cried aloud in horror and despair: "Poor, poor—we shall all be poor!"

"Hush, dear—hush!" said Lucienne. "We are young; it does not matter so much for us. Oh, I cannot bear to think of what it will mean to your parents! O Raoul, what can we do for them?"

Raoul groaned aloud.

"Who broke the news to them?" she asked.

"I wrote it," he replied. "I never could have told them. It was bad enough having to see them afterward."

"And Louise?"

"I wrote to her, too. But for the time being she is the best off of us all. She is so taken up with that wretched husband of hers, she has no time to think of anything else."

"O Raoul! And he, poor wretch?"

"When I got to the Bourse the blow had already fallen, and Frédéric was raging like a madman. Two of his friends helped me, and we took him home absolutely by force. At first he wanted to brave it out; but when he found that I knew about his past, his only idea was—

a revolver. Louise can guard him best from that."

Lucienne made no answer. She thought of her own parents now.

"I must go back to father," went on Raoul. "I promised I would do so, but I had to come to you first. I was afraid you might hear it from someone else."

"How good you are!" Even in her distress she smiled at him. "But go now, dear! Your parents must want you. I suppose it is better that I, too, should go to them?"

"No, no! You must rest now; and, besides, it would remind them too cruelly of—what is past."

He got up, meaning to leave her; but suddenly the realisation of the present came so forcibly upon him that he paused, clenching his hands, and speaking his thoughts angrily and aloud:

"Ruin, ruin! It is too awful, too cruel! Everything that makes life worth living swept from us at a blow! It is cruel and unjust. What have we done to deserve such a punishment? People speak of Providence—"

"Hush, hush, Raoul!" cried Lucienne.

"Take care of what you are saying! How often did you think of God when you were happy? How often did you thank Him for all He gave and which He is now taking from you? And yet you would murmur because He ceases to reward your ingratitude! If you cannot take this trial as an expiation, at least do not say what I pray—oh, how earnestly I pray it!—you may live to repent."

Raoul had never seen his wife roused in this way before; and, admitting the truth of her words, he could not but admire her for speaking as she did. For a moment he was silent; then, going up to her, he took her hands.

"So you pray for me, Lucienne?" he said gently. "Pray again, then, and pray harder than ever. I need it, God help me! God *forgive* me!"

And, passing from the room, he left her alone.

CHAPTER XXIV

A LEGACY

LUCIENNE's parents were seated at breakfast on the morning following that on which she had said her last good-bye to Madame de Mantelon, when they were interrupted by an unexpected visitor.

"I must apologise for disturbing you at such an hour," began the stranger; "but I hope, when you learn my errand, you will forgive me. In the first place, I regret to have to announce to you the death of Madame de Mantelon, which took place yesterday afternoon."

Monsieur de Barli turned in questioning astonishment to his wife, who, seeing this, answered the stranger:

"It is more than kind of Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille—for I presume you come on her behalf—to think of us at such a time. Personally, neither my husband nor myself was

acquainted with the poor lady; but our daughter was so fond of her that we are sincerely sorry to hear of her death."

"The real object of my visit," went on the solicitor, after acknowledging Madame de Barli's courtesies, "is to inform you that your name is mentioned in the deceased lady's will, which at her own request was read to-day."

"A legacy!" cried Madame de Barli. "Impossible! We did not know the lady."

The man of business had by this time produced a legal-looking document from his pocket, and, unfolding it, he asked if he might read it aloud.

"I, Marie Elisabeth Sophie de Rochefeuille, widow of Jean Foulques Langeat, Comte de Mantelon de Bouvières, declare this to be my last will and testament. Having learned of the heroic charity shown by Madame Raoul Mauvoisin, née Lucienne de Barli, toward Pedro Lozares, in forgiving him the injuries he had committed against her and her family, and in nursing him with her own hands, and wishing to testify my admiration for such noble conduct, and my deep affection for the said

Lucienne Mauvoisin, I bequeath to her parents, Monsieur and Madame de Barli, a sum of twelve hundred thousand francs, and I thank God for allowing me to be the instrument of His Providence."

The solicitor folded the paper, and, taking off his glasses, said:

"Madame de Mantelon's affairs are all in order. She had two million francs to dispose of, in spite of all she has already spent in charity; and, as the other legatee is satisfied with the terms of the will, and desires that you should be paid at once, without the delay usual in such cases, the transfer can be affected immediately. If you will make it convenient to call at my office, I shall hand your legacy over to you, half in cash and half in securities."

As one in a dream, Monsieur de Barli listened to the solicitor's final words, and then escorted him to the door. Returning to his wife, he found her in tears; but, instead of the sorrowful weeping of old, these tears were the expression of deep joy.

"O Prosper," she cried, "we have been wicked and sinful! We could not resign our-

selves, and yet see how good God has been to us! It is Lucienne who has earned this blessing for us."

"What does it all mean?" questioned Monsieur de Barli. "That man says she found him, that she knows where he is, that she helped and nursed him. I cannot understand."

"I know nothing more than what we have heard," replied Madame de Barli. "It is all as great a mystery to me as it is to you. One thing I do know, and it is that to Lucienne alone we owe this God-sent legacy; and therefore, Prosper, we must not—*you* must not—refuse her anything she may ask."

"What do you mean?" he asked. "Ah, I understand! And it is useless to expect such a thing of me. There are some offences that it is impossible to forgive."

But Madame de Barli, knowing every inflection of her husband's voice, was satisfied that Lucienne's appeal for Pedro Lozares would not be made in vain.

CHAPTER XXV

A NOTE FROM LUCIENNE'S FATHER

Raoul had passed the whole afternoon of the fatal day in helping his father to go over De Charolles' accounts, and part of the following morning was spent at the same task. When that was completed, they were able to judge the full extent of his liabilities. If the creditors did not press for immediate payment, these would be less than had at first been anticipated. With all the money that the Mauvoisin family could raise by the advance of their own capital, and the sale of jewels, of furniture—of everything, in fact, but the absolute necessaries of life—the deficit barely exceeded the sum of six hundred thousand francs.

Lucienne dared not question Raoul when, after his morning's work, he came home and threw himself down beside the hearth. She saw despair written on his face; and, as words

could do no good, she waited, silent and sympathetic.

"Oh, it is hard, hard!" he muttered at last. "Our lives are to be wrecked. Everything must go, for the want of a sum that could be repaid for certain, if we were only given enough time. That is really the refinement of cruel fate. If we could only raise six hundred thousand francs more, the bank need not cease payment, a panic would be avoided; and, as the securities that we have in hand rose even to their original values, we could pay back all that is owing. My father and the principal creditors would then take measures—legal ones if necessary—to force De Charolles to do this, and so we should be saved. If only I could get some of those men to see things as I see them, they would save themeslves from losing a single franc, if they would advance the sum we need. De Charolles has gone too far; no one will trust him with another penny; bankruptcy must be declared."

"When?" asked Lucienne, breathlessly.

"This very evening, before the Bourse closes —probably about five o'clock. Well, it is eleven now; that leaves six hours of suspense."

"Where are you going?" asked his wife, seeing him preparing to go out.

"I have an appointment at twelve o'clock," replied Raoul; "and I must see De Charolles first. It seems that he wrote a most compromising letter, in which he owns having gone to the Jews for money—and worse. It is of the utmost importance that this should go no further; and, fortunately, the holder of this letter is under an obligation to my father, so he has promised to give it up to one of us at noon to-day."

"Then whilst you are gone," observed Lucienne, "I think I ought to go to see your mother. I know it will be painful for her to see me; but it is only right that I should go to her, and she herself would blame me if I failed in my duty."

"You are right—I know you are right, Lucienne. But—"

"Does she hate me so?" asked Lucienne.

"It is not that, but"—he turned his head away, and spoke very low—"can't you see how you and yours are being avenged?"

His head was bowed as he descended the stairs and crossed out into the street. At the

doorway stood a girl holding a note in her hand, and looking uncertainly about her. He did not even see her, but passed out, whilst she mounted the stairs he had just come down, and knocked at the door that he had closed behind him.

A few moments later, as Raoul was walking down the Rue Neuve des Petit-Champs, a carriage passed quickly by, the driver urging his horses forward. Mechanically he looked up, and to his utter amazement his glance fell on the figure of his wife. She was seated beside a neatly dressed girl, evidently a servant; and, as she was reading a letter, she did not see him.

The maid, Manette's successor, had brought Lucienne a note—merely a peremptory summons from her father, and without a word of explanation. She could not imagine what had happened, and had it not been for the two words, "Come, darling!" which were written across the note in her mother's writing, she would have been torn with anxiety.

CHAPTER XXVI

A NOBLE REVENGE

On arriving at the home of her parents, Lucienne received a full explanation of all that had transpired. She was astonished beyond measure on hearing of the legacy. It was hard for her father to be reconciled to the part she had played in regard to Lozares.

"How could I have done otherwise," murmured Lucienne, appealingly, "and continue to say every day, 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us'? But I cannot understand how Madame de Mantelon came to leave you a legacy."

"It is all owing to your kindness to Lozares," said her mother. "He must have confessed all to Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille. Ah, his sins have brought their own reward!"

"If you could see him as I did at first, you would indeed say so." And she told them of the condition in which she had found him.

In spite of the joy that had come to them, the De Barlis felt that there was something oppressing Lucienne.

"There is something troubling you," said her mother. "Lucienne, surely you need not keep anything from us now."

"Yes, Mother, something is troubling me sorely, grievously; and no one but you can help me."

"I know," said her mother, quickly. "You are thinking of that wretched man, unforgiven still."

"No," replied Lucienne, "not of Pedro now, but of your legacy."

She knelt down beside her father and threw her arms about his neck.

"Father," she said, "at five o'clock this evening De Charolles will be declared bankrupt. His affairs and ours are all so implicated that it means ruin and disgrace to us all. Oh, their misfortune is infinitely greater than ours ever was, for it includes dishonour and disgrace! We shall give up everything, sell everything of value that we possess; but, even so, for the want of six hundred thousand francs, all must be lost."

She told of Raoul's absolute certainty that any loan would ultimately be repaid—any loan, that is, sufficient to pay off the pressing debt. It was not as a gift that she asked the money, but as a loan; and, even though it was to help their bitterest enemies, could they refuse their daughter what for her sake alone had been given to them?

"Prosper, Prosper!" cried Madame de Barli. "How can we refuse her?"

But even to the double appeal Monsieur de Barli was silent.

"Ruin and dishonour!" went on Madame de Barli. "I cannot bear to think of that unhappy woman alone now. What must it be to her, so haughty, so eaten up with pride! Lucienne, let us go to her; let us tell her we sympathize at least—"

"Go to her!" broke in Prosper. "*You* go to her! Never! That I will never allow. Let her rather come to you."

"O Prosper, can you not forgive? Let her forget what is past. Remembrance could only increase her sufferings. What could bring her to me now, the miserable, unhappy woman?"

The old man took his wife's frail hand, and,

holding it in his own, he stretched the other one to Lucienne, saying:

"I think she will come, and that soon; and she will say, 'Thank you!' "

An hour later, the three who had gone through so much that day, who had met sorrow and joy, who had struggled with temptation and had come forth victorious—together these three entered the little house in the Rue d'Arras where their benefactress lay dead. For two of them this was their first visit; but Lucienne led them straight to the room where only the previous day she had heard the words, then not understood in their full meaning, "She thought of you—she did not forget you," the room where rested all that was mortal of the Countess de Mantelon. So still, so peaceful, and so beautiful in death—nowhere on earth could their sacrifice be more fittingly offered to God than in the serenity of this presence. And, kneeling, they prayed together that the gift they were about to make in favour of Raoul's parents might be accepted in heaven in reparation for the murmurs, the ill feeling, the want of resignation in the past.

Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille had not left

her place at her sister's side; and Lucienne, going to her, whispered gently:

"Dear, dear friend and benefactress, how can we ever express a fraction of our gratitude! She knows it all now."

"Ah, Lucienne!" said Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille, "she knew that in doing as she has done she has given me the greatest comfort, the only consolation that such a grief as mine can know."

She could not restrain her tears, and Lucienne wept with her. But before long, thoughtful as ever of others, the old lady turned to Monsieur de Barli.

"I want, in the presence of my dear dead sister, to ask you one favour," she said, "a favour that our dear Lucienne no doubt will ask, but I want to be beforehand with her."

"I know what you would say," replied the old man, brokenly. "But you need not ask it, for it is granted already. As a personal favour, I will beg of Lucienne to take me to-day to Lozares."

Scarcely had he spoken when Lucienne rose from her knees.

"Dear Father, later I will most gladly do as

you ask, but now I have another task before me. I must go—I must tear myself away. If she could speak, she would tell me to do so; and so would you, Mademoiselle, if you knew the full extent of your—of her generosity. It is not for Lozares alone that it wins forgiveness: it means salvation, peace, and reconciliation to all my family—to my own as well as to Raoul's. I cannot, dare not, delay the Heaven-sent message."

"Go, then; and God be with you!" said Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille.

Bending over the still form, Lucienne pressed her lips for the last time on the inanimate brow of her benefactress; and, with a long-drawn embrace from Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille, and a whispered word to her mother, she left the room.

Again an hour passed by, and Raoul had learned the whole—the astounding end of all these mysteries. The offering of the de Barlis had been made through their daughter's hand; and, in humiliation and gratitude, had been accepted.

Then together Raoul and Lucienne ascended the stairs of the house in the Rue Lafayette

that only a year ago we saw her for the first time ascending, alone and so unhappy. Madame de Mauvoisin sat in her drawing-room, so soon—as she thought—to be dismantled; but as yet nothing was changed in it. It was just as it had been when we last saw it twelve long months ago. But she herself—ah, what a change was to be seen in her—stricken to the earth, bowed down, crushed with shame!

Very gently Raoul asked if Lucienne might come in, as she had something of importance to tell her.

"Lucienne?" repeated his mother, with tears in her eyes. "Yes, let her come, if she wishes. But what can she have to say to me? Ah, Raoul, she is an angel! Let her come to me. I know she is too good, too noble, to rejoice. Yet how she and hers have been avenged!"

And Lucienne, coming in, broke to her mother-in-law the form her vengeance had taken.

CHAPTER XXVII

TWELVE MONTHS LATER

A YEAR had passed by. Madame Mauvoisin was again at home to her friends, and despite all that the last twelve months had brought about there was little change to be seen in the luxury of the salon; indeed, it was even more richly decorated than on the day we first saw Lucienne entering it, for in the Church calendar the feast of St. Teresa was recorded, and the great Spanish mystic was Madame Mauvoisin's patroness, so that the fifteenth of October brought a profusion of flowers from her friends wherewith to deck her apartment. It was hard to believe that the summer was over, that the grey days of November were nearer than the sunshine of June, which surely must have been needed to produce the varying tints of the bouquets with which every available space was laden.

It was a long established custom that the givers of these birthday offerings should be invited to dinner to pay their respects in person to St. Teresa's namesake, and this year was to be no exception to its predecessors.

The usual invitations had been sent out and accepted with alacrity, for misfortune, which the poet says disperses our friends and leaves us solitary, had not overshadowed the Mauvoisins for long enough to have this effect, and their circle of acquaintances had not diminished.

Yet sorrow had not darkened the threshold without leaving some traces after it. There had been a moment when it seemed about to engulf everything in the dark abyss of ruin and dishonour; but a firm hand had held it back—the strong hand of a brave woman, and it had been forced to fly away.

Yet nothing had changed in Madame Mauvoisin's surroundings. The enforced sale that would have deprived her of all her valuables had not, after all, to take place, for if his parents had been ruined Raoul would have had to share in that ruin. In spite of his wife's generosity he would have had to sell what his

father had given him to lessen, as far as he could, their load of debt. But M. and Madame de Barli were determined that Lucienne's home should remain intact, and as the surest way of securing this end they had advanced two hundred thousand francs more than they had at first agreed to lend, in Lucienne's name, to save the credit of her husband's family.

Only one thing was missing from amongst the collection of ornaments that decorated Madame Mauvoisin's salon, and that was a small marble vase, not apparently of much intrinsic value, and not very noticeable amongst others that were more valuable and more artistic. But the marble vase had a history attached to it that made it a unique souvenir.

It had belonged to St. Francis of Sales, who had given it to one of the magistrates of Annecy when he was Bishop there, and it had eventually come into the possession of M. Mauvoisin's great uncle, who had left it in his will to his great nephew, who, without much feeling of attachment to it himself, realised the value is might be to others, and fully approved when his wife took it from its place and proposed giving it to Madame de Barli.

The offering was Madame Mauvoisin's apology for the past—her request for pardon, and it was accepted with a single word of thanks; but that word was accompanied by a smile and a pressure of the hand that showed full understanding, full pardon, and surely St. Francis, the Peacemaker, must have smiled if he saw from Heaven the offering of his vase and its acceptance.

So much for Madame Mauvoisin's surroundings. If they were not much changed, she herself was little more so. She was one of those people who are like trees in a storm that the wind bends nearly to the ground, but when the storm passes by they rise up as straight as ever, having suffered no further loss than that of a few superfluous leaves.

Nevertheless, the storm of misfortune had left two lasting changes in Madame Mauvoisin's feelings. In the first place, Lucienne had become in her eyes a sort of idol. Her name was never mentioned without a flow of praise, and she was placed altogether on a pedestal, as something too precious and perfect for contamination with others.

As far as the object of this sort of worship

was concerned, she was truly glad that her mother-in-law approved of her and admired her, but she would far sooner have simply been loved and treated as a daughter. Had that been the case she might have been able to influence her mother-in-law to help her to look beyond and above the trifles of daily life; but as yet Madame Mauvoisin felt no need for such help as Lucienne longed to give her. Misfortune might have taught it to her, but as it was she would go on through life without knowing what was wanting to make her really happy, till perhaps the weaknesses, the impotence of old age would open her eyes at last.

The other change was in her feelings towards her son-in-law. It was as though Lucienne and M. de Charolles had taken each other's place in the heart of their mother-in-law. She was not only furiously angry with him, but she had also been so profoundly humiliated that her every thought of him was tinged with bitterness, with contempt and aversion. For the sake, however, of Louise and the children there had been no open break between the two families, for it had been decided that the public need never know the whole story of what had

happened. So the Baron de Charolles was to be one of the guests for whom M. and Madame Mauvoisin were waiting. Raoul's father had suffered more than his mother had done, and those awful days with the revelations and the remorse that they brought with them had left their traces on the once grey head that now was white as snow, on the bending of the formerly upright figure, and the deep lines on brow and lip.

In the dim light cast by the rose-tinted shades in the drawing-room these changes were not so apparent as they were in the full blaze of the dining-room table. Here Madame de Barli sat at the right of her host, and she had altered perhaps as much as he, but in a very different way. Happiness is the best doctor in the world, and it had done its work in this case so well that, with the remembrance of what Madame de Barli had been, one could hardly now recognise her. Hers was the face of a woman who had come through suffering to peace, but it was the peace that was the uppermost. There was only one regret in her heart, which was that she and her husband had not made better use of their adversity, that they

had not been more resigned to the will of God, who had been so good to them.

If M. Mauvoisin had aged by twenty years, M. de Barli had become almost as much younger. The bitterness and irritability that poverty and misfortune had produced had disappeared, and he had become once more the brilliant conversationalist, the alert man of the world who had formerly been so universally sought after in society at Poitiers.

Further down the table there was another familiar face—or was it not only the ghost of the once honoured guest whose presence was now barely tolerated, and that only for the sake of his wife? M. de Charolles was eating his heart out—anyone who looked at him closely could see that. Yet he showed a bold front to the world still. He held his head high, and woe betide any man who would dare to hint, in his presence, that he was not the successful financier that he had always been known to be. He had been obliged to submit to the terms that Raoul dictated, and though he continued his operations on the Stock Exchange apparently as he did before, he had to render an account of each separate deal to the

secret committee that had been appointed to watch him. His financial genius had not been at fault when he declared if he could only tide over a certain span of time that he would be richer than ever before. The turn of the tide had come, and thanks to the De Barli's loan it had not come too late. But as yet De Charolles himself had been at no profit from it. The first thing that had to be done was to repay the De Barli's loan, and when that was done there were other creditors to be satisfied before the Mauvoisin's own affairs could be put on a safe and sure basis. M. Mauvoisin had had enough of speculation. All he asked now was a secure, if somewhat diminished, income from reliable investments. All this took time to arrange, and when it was done the Baron was to be obliged to put the final most humiliating touch to his enforced reparation. Louise had promised her parents that she would insist upon having her own fortune, as well as the sum that had been settled upon the children, paid into the hands of trustees, and tied up so that what ever the future might bring, the husband and father would have no power to touch it. His passion for gambling had shown itself to be too strong

for anyone who knew of it ever to trust him again. A gambler and with no sense of honour! And he was her husband, the father of her children. Poor Louise, she was indeed the one who was the most to be pitied. In her own shallow way she had loved the man, and she had been inordinately proud of him. And now where was her love? Swept away by the knowledge of what he really was, whilst her pride had been humbled to the very dust.

In the first agony of these revelations she had turned to her mother for comfort and sympathy, and what had she found? Sympathy certainly, but sympathy that only found expression in furious abuse of the author of all this evil. She could not listen to her parents' tirades against the man whom they openly wished to see punished to the full extent of the law, from whom their hands were only held back not by any thought of Christian forbearance or religion, but by worldly prudence, by what was politic and seemly.

She could not love her husband, she could not honour him; but at least she could be loyal to him, and her parents' attitude towards him was more than she could bear. Instead of finding

comfort at her mother's side she found her sorrow increased, and she shrank back into herself, feeling that all the world was against her. There was only one person whom she knew felt any real sympathy for her, and, remembering the past, she dared not now turn to her; but when they met, Lucienne was so gentle, so understanding that, at first timidly, later, with more assurance, Louise went to her, and from Lucienne her sister-in-law learnt the only way to bear humiliation and suffering.

The day after Madame Mauvoisin's feast brought round another anniversary, but of a very different nature. It was a year since Madame de Mantelon had died, and, although Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille had asked to be left quite alone on that day, Lucienne and her parents were with her in spirit, and shared some of her sorrowful memories. The old lady had nothing now to bind her to this world; she was only waiting the summons to join her own in the Kingdom of God, and in the meantime she worked on for others with all the strength that her life of eighty years had left her, gladly accepting the help that not only Lucienne, but Raoul also, and Madame de Barli, offered her,

and finding pleasure in their company, although nothing could make up to her for the one who had gone before.

On Madame de Mantelon's anniversary a Requiem Mass was to be celebrated at Notre Dame des Victoires, and the De Barlis, with Raoul and Lucienne, were amongst the first to take their places in the church. As she knelt again in the place where only a year ago she had begged for strength to forgive Lozares, to go back to him with spiritual and corporal works of mercy, she could not help thinking of all the answer to that prayer had brought to her. God had not only given her the strength she had asked for, but He had also bestowed a reward of which she had never dreamt. Of herself, she could not have gone back to that loathsome criminal, but if she had not had the will to do right, if she had turned a deaf ear to the interior voice which told her that there is no true Christianity in a heart which of which she had never dreamed. If she had not asked for help and strength, and had she abandoned Lozares, what would have been the consequences? Would he not have died in despair, and have gone before his Maker with an un-

pardonable sin upon his soul—that soul which in all probability would have gone to the devil for ever?

And she herself—what would she not have lost? As the events of the past months came crowding over her she could only raise her heart to God in speechless thanks, and in her contemplation of His goodness temporal things were for the moment forgotten.

At the sound of the Communion bell, M. and Madame de Barli rose and knelt at the altar rail, to be followed by Lucienne, and she was not alone. Raoul was with her, and it was this—this above all the other favours that Heaven had bestowed upon her, that Lucienne held the greatest. Misfortune had taught Raoul not only to recognise and honour the source of his wife's goodness, but also to imitate her in seeking it. There had been no time for religion in his old careless life, for he was taken up by the pursuit of pleasure. Now, when he had his father's business, as well as the social and philanthropic works in which Mademoiselle de Rochefeuille's friends had welcomed his co-operation, to occupy his days, still there was time for Mass, time for daily prayers, time for

the Sacraments; and though he was no longer to be seen lounging about the clubs, his sporting friends found him as ready as ever for a day's shooting or a week-end's fishing, provided in the latter case that Sunday's Mass was not neglected.

When the Requiem was over Raoul and Lucienne went back to breakfast with Madame de Barli, not in the sad surroundings of a few months ago, but in a bright, sunny apartment in the Rue Taitbout, almost opposite their daughter's home. It was a quiet meal, for the remembrance of all that this last year had brought was over them all; such things bring is akin to awe. Afterwards they went together with them a thankfulness that, though joyful, to the cemetery of Père la Chaise, to take the only gift—excepting prayers—that they could offer to their benefactress—to lay a wreath of flowers upon her tomb.

It was surrounded by a low railing, but to-day the gate was open, and entering the little enclosure they knelt before the headstone which, under a graven coat-of-arms, bore a short inscription:—

"Here lies the body of Marie Elisabeth

Sophie de Rochefeuille, Comtesse de Mantelon de Bouvières, who died on October 16, 19—. Blessed are they who die in the Lord, for their works follow them."

"But their effects remain," murmured Raoul.

"And their example also," added Lucienne.

When their prayers were said they passed out of the enclosure, but Lucienne still had a small wreath in her hand, and they did not leave the cemetery at once.

In a distant corner, shaded by shrubs and trees, stood a grave with a plain cross at its head, on which five words were inscribed.

"Pedro Lozares," and under the name: "Requiescat in Pace."

Five months ago Pedro Lozares had died. His sufferings had increased, but he had borne all so patiently that surely now he was resting in peace. In the end death had come mercifully. M. de Barli was kneeling by him, and it was his hand who closed his eyes, whilst Lucienne still held to the already stiffening lips the Crucifix that he had clung to, to the last, that was his tangible token of hope and forgiveness.

THE END