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AURETTE.

BY

Henry Gréville.

ILLUSTRATED

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"MADEMOISELLE," SAID HE, "PERMIT ME TO ESCORT YOU TO THE DOOR."—Page 239.

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CHAPTER I.

In the warm air of a superb June afternoon the bells of the cathedral at Angers rang out musically, and the light breeze which stirred the little white clouds in the azure sky bore the joyous sounds across the town, beyond the old camp of Fremur, almost to the river Loire.

Standing at the entrance of a conservatory, whose shades protected her delicate complexion from the burning rays of the sun, Aurette Leneil inclined her head a little so as to hear better. The deep, solemn tones of the bells filled with strains of mysterious harmony the grove of poplar and fir trees which formed a curtain of foliage around the house which nestled in its verdure.

"Vespers are over, and the procession has left Saint Maurice," said she to a small domestic who stood near her, watching her arrange a boquet of flowers. "Go and see if the carriage is waiting."

The girl disappeared, and Aurette bent lovingly over her work.

It was a simple bouquet, destined to adorn the centre of the dinner table on this beautiful *Fète Dieu* Sunday, but many things may be expressed in a bunch of flowers, and this one was a poem. Every blossom was exquisite: white pelargoniums veined with purple or crimson, delicate heliotropes, feathery fronds of the maiden-hair fern, rare white and yellow roses; bleeding hearts, and here and there, a fragile spray of exotic honeysuckle: a delicious mixture of color and fragrance.

Aurette leaned fondly over the flowers which were placed loosely in a Bohemian glass vase, and while breathing in their rich perfume, she adroitly slipped a ribbon around them and knotted it without lifting them from the vase.

"I believe that I have never arranged so beautiful a bouquet," she said to herself, while a smile almost triumphant, parted her lips and shone in her eyes, and a fugitive blush flitted across her fresh, charming face as she stooped to kiss the odorous flower-petals.

The rolling of carriage wheels upon the graveled walk aroused her from her pre-occupation; she ran into the house and soon returned wearing a broad-brimmed hat which cast a shadow over her soft brown eyes and golden hair.

"Papa," said she, turning toward one of the windows which opened upon the portico; "Come immediately, or we will be late, and Julia will scold us."

M. Leneil soon appeared; being a victim to chronic rheumatism, he walked with a slow, feeble step; yet there was something noble in his bearing, and his tall figure, which was perfectly erect, in spite of frequent paroxysms of pain, and his handsome face, both testified to his right to the name which he bore in his youth; Handsome Leneil.

After he was comfortably seated in the carriage he turned to his daughter.

"Where is Sidonie?" said he, "is she not coming?"

A slight shadow stole across Aurette's delicate face as she replied in the negative.

"Nor Charles?" said M. Leneil, "We alone in all that pomp?"

Meanwhile, the horses had started off briskly in the direction of the town, and he sat by his daughter's side, lost in meditation.

"Have you not observed," he said at last, turning to Aurette, "that Sidonie has become very serious."

Aurette blushed almost imperceptibly. The

least emotion brought the blood to her face, which was as fair and sweet as the petals of a magnolia.

"Very serious?" she repeated, after a slight hesitation.

"Or sad; I hardly know how to express it, but she is certainly changed. She used to be the picture of happiness; she is not ill?"

"No; at least I hope not." Then after a short silence Aurette turned to her father with a countenance beaming with kindness. "She is young, you know, papa," she added with an expression almost supplicating.

M. Leneil laughed.

"Young! I should say so. You are not old, neither is Charles, nor Julia; you are all young, my little birds! I am the only old one in our Nest."

He sighed deeply. Four years previous to this, he had sustained a terrible loss in the death of his wife, and but for the solicitude of his eldest daughter, his children would have been doubly orphaned.

"I?" cried Aurette with a radiant smile, "I am old! Why, I am positively venerable! You know as well as I do, papa, that I will soon be twenty-three; it is no use to dissemble!"

M. Leneil looked at her with an intensity of affection which could only have come from the depths of his soul.

She slipped her slender, gloved hand into his good paternal one, and pressed it tenderly, turning away her face for fear of betraying her emotion. At this moment the Cathedral bells burst forth into a Hosanna, almost above their heads.

"See, papa," exclaimed Aurette, "there is the procession. We are just in time for Julia."

The procession moved slowly along under the trees of the boulevard, between the two rows of a curious, respectful crowd. The trunks of the trees were wrapped with white linen and tastefully wreathed with garlands of flowers and long festoons of muslin, and oriflammes strewn with golden stars floated lightly from the windows. While waiting for the procession to pass, a juggler had spread his carpet upon the ground, and was energetically performing his tricks to the amazement of the expectant crowd.

"This makes one feel young again," said M. Leneil with an indulgent smile.

The noise of the drums, beaten unceasingly,

drew nearer, and the mountebank quickly folded his carpet, and went further off to display his skill.

At Aurette's command, the carriage had stopped at the corner of the boulevard, and standing side by side, the father and daughter watched the cortege slowly advance toward them. First came the local musicians, beating their drums with great dignity; then the children, young girls in short dresses with their hair curled, and other tiny darlings trotting along as best they could, occasionally guided by the protecting hand of a mother or sister. Then there were the communicants for the year, in their fresh muslin dresses and long veils; then the bearers of standards, oriflammes and the litanies of the Virgin emblazoned upon blue and white banners; the theological Virtues, and several saints represented by young girls belonging to prominent families, and others carrying upon a cushion the insignia of their fraternity, the whole making a charming picture of virginal youth, as they marched onward in their snowy garments, chanting hymns.

Mary Magdalen, in a robe which fell in graceful folds around her slender form, walked with bowed head, and her waving hair fell almost to her knees.

"That is Julia," whispered Aurette.

As if warned by a secret intuition, the Mary Magdalen raised her eyes for an instant, and seeing the beaming faces of her father and sister, responded to their affectionate glances with a smile in which there was a strange mixture of filial joy and religious ecstasy. The smile vanished quickly, and she resumed her attitude of prayerful repentance.

"I am glad this is her last year at the convent," murmured M. Leneil, "for she would end by not caring for us."

"Papa!" said Aurette gently, "you surely would not be jealous of the good God!"

"No, because she is coming back to us," replied M. Leneil gravely.

The procession of boys now passed. There was a diminutive John the Baptist, in swaddling clothes and a sheepskin, who seemed suffocated, at once, with pride and zeal. A youthful Christ bore his hollow cross without sorrow or fatigue, and a Saint Louis of the same age, bearing the crown of thorns upon a crimson velvet cushion, brushed the dust from his royal mantle bordered with ermine, with the vanity of a child who feels himself handsome and admired. The older boys walked behind with banners and oriflammes of gold and scarlet. Then

came the band from a celebrated college of the town, the clergy of the Cathedral, the censer bearer, and at last, an old priest, under a canopy, carrying the Host, which was covered with a cloth of gold.

"To the Cathedral," said Aurette to the coachman, and the carriage was soon rolling slowly along the streets where the inhabitants were hastening homeward to take in the holiday decorations, in order to end their day joyously out of doors.

M. Leneil and his daughter arrived at Saint Maurice just as the procession turned the corner of the Archbishop's palace. The walls and railings of the palace were hidden beneath antique tapestry, treasures belonging to the Cathedral, admirably preserved and hoarded there for centuries. All this magnificence passed before them a second time, in a glory somewhat theatrical. They were marching rapidly now, in haste to re-enter. The Mary Magdalen who still walked with downcast eyes, pale, fatigued, unconscious of the murmur of admiration which her beauty provoked from a crowd, more select than that of the boulevard, did not see them this time.

Aurette stepped quickly from the carriage and just as her sister was about to pass under the porch,

where the air was trembling with the vibrations of thundering organs and the swelling peals of harmony from the bells, she touched her gently on the arm to attract her attention.

Julia started violently and remained transfixed to the spot, while her young companions ran past her to take their places in the choir. A nun hurried back with a stern air to ascertain the cause of the detention, but when she recognized Mlle. Leneil her expression changed instantly.

"Julia is greatly fatigued, Mother," said Aurette, "and I am afraid she will faint; you must permit me to take her away with me at once."

She spoke in a manner which did not admit of a refusal. The nun, seeing the tired, worn face of her pupil, readily gave her consent.

Leading her sister aside, a little within the doorway, she quickly tucked up the waving blonde locks which made a royal mantle for the frail young body. She then placed upon her head a straw hat trimmed with a single white ribbon, which she had brought with her, and this being accomplished she returned to the carriage accompanied by Julia.

"Take us home now," said Aurette as she threw around her sister a light gray wrap.

The old coachman touched up his horses, and Julia suddenly awakened from her state of half hallucination, and returned to real life.

"Good evening, papa; good evening, Aurette," said she, as the color mounted to her pale cheeks, and a new light shone in her violet eyes. "Ah me, I am so tired." She stretched herself upon the cushions with a supple, graceful movement, which seemed to give her a sensible pleasure.

"I was benumbed," said she laughing, "physically and morally. You restored the circulation by putting on my hat, I assure you, Aurette!"

M. Leneil smiled for the first time since he had seen her in the procession.

"You will brighten up at the Nest," said he, "The Bertholons are coming to dinner."

"Ah! that is pleasant!" said Julia approvingly. "Have you made a beautiful bouquet, Aurette?"

"I hope so," replied Aurette gaily, with the same sweet blush which had come to her cheeks when she pressed the flowers to her lips.

"And Mme. Bertholon will take them away with her as usual," said the young girl with a significant look which went to Aurette's soul. She smiled

feebly, as if to demand mercy, and received in exchange a glance full of infinite tenderness.

Ten minutes later they alighted from the carriage before the door of their home, so beautifully called Bird's Nest; which they had finally abbreviated to "the Nest."

Here it was that twenty years before, M. Leneil had prepared a home for his young wife, who soon converted the old house into one of the most delightful country places in the neighborhood of Angers.

An old lady of about sixty was awaiting them on the steps.

"I am a little ahead of time," she said with an amiable smile, "I don't mean to say that you are late, however, for I have not waited for you long."

"We had the good fortune to find Julia just as the procession was entering the Cathedral," said M. Leneil, "It is very kind of you to come so early, but where is Raoul?"

"In the park, I believe. We found no one here to receive us."

"Charles not here!"

"He has perhaps just left; I have not seen him."

"Nor Sidonie?"

"I have not seen her either; but you may be sure they are not lost."

Mme. Bertholon pinched up her lips as she pronounced these last words, and M. Leneil averted his eyes with a certain embarrassment. Aurette blushed, Julia turned pale, and every one seemed ill at ease.

"Here they are!" said the father with an expression of relief.

Raoul Bertholon appeared upon the winding avenue accompanied by Charles. Sidonie walked behind them with an air of distraction, twirling her sash ribbon around her finger, and letting it fall only to resume it again immediately.

"So you have come at last!" said M. Leneil somewhat sternly, "you should have been here, both of you, to receive our guests in our absence."

Sidonie remained silent with downcast eyes. Charles stammered out an excuse, and embraced his younger sister, and began immediately to converse with Mme. Bertholon.

Raoul approached Aurette and they pressed each other's hands in silence. Since their engagement a year before, they had perhaps not a dozen times had an opportunity to converse together for any length of time; but Raoul came with his mother

every Sunday to dine at the Nest, and the young girl found herself becoming each day, more and more in love with her betrothed.

She had adorned him with every virtue; she even attributed to him genius, and expected great things of him when once he was married. What? Aurette did not know herself, but great things at any rate. He was an amiable young fellow, intelligent, though somewhat effeminate, without possessing any remarkable ability. At the age of twenty-nine he had chosen the career of an architect, but up to this time he had reached no distinction in his profession. Being an only child, his mother allowed him an annuity of twenty thousand francs, which dispensed with the necessity of making any other effort, for he was not ambitious. After a while, when he should have exchanged this semi-guardianship, indefinitely prolonged by a despotic mother, for the liberty of a married man, he intended to apply himself to his work with renewed energy, and accomplish wonders! And Aurette listened with a smile of rapture and confidence. But they had very little chance to discuss their plans; Mme. Bertholon was always between them, kind and affable to her future daughter-in-law, but always present, a

circumstance which drew from her son's lips a murmur, more weary than respectful.

Aurette pacified him with a glance, imploring his indulgence. She understood this jealous mother. Could one too dearly love so adorable a son? Mme. Bertholon would not always be with them; ere long they would have a Nest of their own. They were to marry in September, when Julia would leave school to remain permanently under the paternal roof, and would take from Aurette's hands the government of the household.

In the meantime, every Sunday, Aurette arranged an exquisite bouquet to adorn the table, and which her future mother-in-law never failed to take away with her. This bouquet was a poem into which the young girl poured out, without reserve, all of her tender, confiding love; its perfumes and colors were the language, as ardent as the cry of passion, in which she expressed the vague sentiments which sometimes troubled her. She fondly hoped and believed that as long as the flowers were fresh they would speak of her to her affianced husband.

"Is it not wrong to love so ardently?" she sometimes asked herself, anxiously. But the object of her love was so soon to be her husband; this

ought to have re-assured her, still, she was sometimes troubled with an indefinable fear.

"Do you really love him so much?" asked Sidonie one day, as she nibbled the petals of a rose she had just plucked.

Aurette lowered her head and looking into her heart she was frightened at the intensity of passion which she discovered there. Her twenty-three years had given to this lawful love a force which was unknown to the young girl hardly escaped from adolescence.

"And if he or you should become poor? Or if your marriage should be broken off?" continued Sidonie, half in jest.

"I would die," responded Aurette quietly.

Sidonie regarded her with an air of incredulity; *she* could never say such a thing; life was too sweet to her!

Sidonie was nineteen. Her parents had died when she was very young, and good Mme. Leniel had welcomed her to the Nest. Her father had declared himself bankrupt, some said in order to avoid accounting for large sums of money invested elsewhere. And then, too, there had been much gossip about his death; he had committed suicide,

it was said, for a woman who had wrought his ruin. Meanwhile, his daughter, who was the god-child of Mme. Leniel, could not be abandoned; she was taken to the Nest and remained there.

When Mme. Leniel died, Aurette was scarcely eighteen, Sidonie fourteen and Julia eleven. The two younger girls were at a convent where they were to finish their education; Sidonie had only returned the year before, at the time of Aurette's betrothal to Raoul Bertholon.

She had received the news very coldly; it made her ill-humored, for the moment, to hear of any marriage. Although she had been brought up in the same way as Julia and Aurette, and treated as a sister by the two young girls, she soon discovered, in that intuitive way in which people always find out something of which they should be ignorant, her true position in the eyes of the world and the family which had adopted her.

Proud and keen, Sidonie comprehended that there was very little chance for her to marry, so the marriages of others displeased her.

"You will fly away next," said Julia to her one day, jestingly.

"I? no indeed! I must make my own living. I intend to be a governess."

But M. Leniel was greatly opposed to this idea. However, he permitted her to present herself for examination; she was refused.

"So much the better!" said he, "you will now be forced to remain with us."

Sidonie received the same allowance for pocket money as Julia; she alone persisted in tracing the line of demarcation, more imaginary than real, between herself and the sisters. In direct contrast to these affected airs of haughty dignity, a real insouciance, an absolute indifference to the cares of life, sometimes made her gay and even boisterous, instead of sour and morose, as one would naturally have expected to see her.

Charles Leniel, four years Aurette's senior, had returned to the Nest almost at the exact time of his sister's betrothal. He had been traveling for several years in the interest of his father's bank, and on his arival from India after a long sojourn, his native land appeared more beautiful, more desirable, and more attractive in every way than ever before.

As they sat upon the terrace at the Nest on summer evenings, in speaking of his travels, he would

say again and again: "But after all, this is the most beautiful spot in the world!"

The Loire and the Maine at his feet, winding like blue and silver ribbons through the meadows; the woody hillsides, the trees with hues and forms so magnificent that one might find inspiration even in the most insignificant alder—the whole country, theme for poets' songs—thrilled him with a sweet and infinite joy.

"I was born to live here!" he exclaimed, "and although destiny has made me a kind of wanderer, I will at least come here to die!"

Sidonie, on hearing him so openly avow his pastoral, provincial tastes, would toss her pretty head disdainfully, and a look of scorn would flit across her beautiful face, whose features were a little too pronounced, but which nevertheless had an indescribable charm.

Tall and *svelte*, but with a well developed form, shapely shoulders and a graceful neck, she held her chin always somewhat elevated, which gave to her face, already haughty, a commanding look, redeemed by the insouciance of her charming smile. One could see that she loved to rule, but not being

able to do so, she accepted her lot, and affected a supreme indifference to everything.

Nothing is more vexatious to a man than this assumption of indifference; what pleasure was there in being adored by the others, esteemed by his superiors, respected by his equals, if a young girl, who failed in her examination, counts one for nothing in her life?

Charles felt this mortification vaguely, hardly acknowledging it to himself. He had known Sidonie since her childhood, and, being a respectful son to a mother whom he loved above all else, he accepted her as a sister. In after years ,when his mother's death and the illness of his father had forced him to face the possibility of eventually taking upon himself the responsibility of the head of the family, he had set aside her share in the paternal inheritance, so that the effects of his parents' kindness might be felt even in the far distant future.

So, it was only with brotherly vexation that he received Sidonie's disdain, and in a spirit of friendly conciliation he endeavored to keep on amicable terms with her. But their conversation inevitably ended with mockery on one side, and rudeness on the other. Aurette was kept busy adjusting these

quarrels, which generally terminated with merry peals of laughter on Sidonie's part. But these broils gradually ceased; Charles was absent on business, from time to time, and he would return to India immediately after his sister's marriage, so the quarrels of the young people would no longer disturb the tranquillity of the Nest; yet Aurette was still anxious.

Dinner, on Sunday, was served in the large dining-room, on three sides of which were glass doors through which one could get a glimpse of the exquisite landscape flooded with the last golden rays of the setting sun. The air was full of peace and glory, the flowers in Aurette's bouquet shed a perfume like divine music; out of doors the birds were singing, the blackbirds particularly, calling from tree to tree in notes almost as sweet as those of a nightingale. The table was loaded with luscious fruits served on Limoges china of creamy whiteness, wreathed with a lace-work of rose-tinted porcelain.

Mme. Bertholon gave a sigh of happy contentment as she leaned back in her chair; her keen, scrutinizing glance wandered around the table and

fell upon Charles, who had been unusually silent during the repast.

"When will you return to India?" she said to him in a low but penetrating voice.

The young man started as if the subject was painful to him. He looked at her in an embarrassed way and replied with a kind of effort:

"As soon after my sister's marriage as it is convenient, madame."

A sharp glance flashed from Sidonie's downcast eyes; she elevated her chin as usual, and her gray, cat-like eyes roved from one to the other of the company without resting on any one.

"You regret to leave, do you not?" continued Mme. Bertholon, without raising her voice.

"Ah! Certainly!" sighed Charles with inexpressible sadness.

M. Leniel rose from the table.

"Let us not think of it," said he; "moreover, his absence will not last forever. My son is building his fortune as I built mine, with hard work, patience and many sacrifices."

"Yes, father," said Charles gently, "but you were not compelled to exile yourself."

"Exile is a cruel word, my son; more cruel than the thing itself," observed M. Leniel, "especially when one is at liberty to return and renounce his career!"

"And no brave man would do that," interrupted Julia, who up to that moment had taken no part in the conversation.

Her clear, crystaline voice resounded like a bell.

Silence reigned; they left the dining-room and went to sit upon the terrace to drink their coffee. Aurette poured it out and Julia handed the cups; she had taken off her white muslin dress and donned a woolen robe of a silver-grey color which gave her almost a monastic appearance.

The conversation soon revived; the gentlemen lighted their cigars, and Raoul, who by virtue of his rights was sitting near Aurette, was deeply absorbed in watching the spiral wreaths of smoke dissolve in the air. He was thinking of nothing in reality, in the beatitude of a good dinner past, and an excellent cigar present.

The stars began to twinkle in the blue heavens, scattered here and there, at first scarcely visible, increasing in number and brilliancy as the fiery tints of the setting sun faded into the delicate gray

of twilight. Aurette felt her soul rising like incense and mounting toward the stars. In a few months their divine splendor would have for her a new meaning; Raoul would still be at her side, but as her husband; nothing could separate them then; no one would have the right to come between them, and she could hold within her own the cool, firm hand that now merely touched her fingers at meeting and parting. In this dream of definite, complete possession, she pictured herself in the embrace of two strong arms in which she would rest as confidingly as when her father lulled her to sleep in her childhood.

In a few months, or rather weeks, she could speak aloud the name which now she only whispered to herself in silence. She would tell him of the tenderness budding in her soul; she would think, feel, live *aloud* in the presence of this other soul which would have become her own. She would read his thoughts, she would bend over him and, gazing into the depths of his eyes, divine all that he had ever felt or dreamed, without his telling her.

"Give us some music, Aurette," said her father, "we will remain here."

Aroused from her rapturous thoughts, she rose obediently and entered the drawing-room where the lamps were lighted.

Every Sunday she played thus for a half hour before Mme. Bertholon asked for her carriage.

She first selected, almost unconsciously, melancholy pieces, because their music was to her a song of adieu. Besides, is there not ever an undercurrent of profound melancholy in all love which is still unrealized? Aurette felt herself quivering with emotion; she wished to weep, to cry out to this impassive Raoul, who loved her though, else why did he care to marry her? How she loved him! She was as bold in her music as she was with her flowers. This virginal Aurette, who would have died of shame if her soul had suddenly been unveiled to her lover, was capable of expressing the most ardent passion in the harmonies she could not create, but which she knew so well how to interpret.

After playing two favorite airs of her father, she began one of Mendelssohn's "Songs Without Words," in which there is so much of love and rapture. She played slowly, for she was alone, and it seemed to her that she was at the organ in the great Cathedral, full of the faithful, and that she

was speaking tor all the human souls in distress of love, presenting to the Almighty their ardent supplications. When she finished, the tears were rolling down her cheeks.

She took her little handkerchief and quickly wiped them away, then stepped through the French window which opened upon the terrace, to join the others.

"You play well," said Mme. Bertholon, in her concise tones, "you have made much progress since last winter; you possess a beautiful accomplishment for entertainment."

In the darkness, Julia slipped her arm around her sister's waist, and pressed a warm kiss on her cheek.

"She is horrible, your mother-in-law!" she said under her breath, "and you are an angel."

M. Leneil held out his hand to his eldest daughter.

"She never fails to charm me," said he. "I am accustomed to listening to her; it seems to me that she is speaking when she plays thus."

Aurette's eyes sought Raoul's and found them. She was very beautiful in this twilight, and for a moment he was truly in love. As she passed near

him he gently caught her hand which was half hidden in the folds of her dress.

Mme. Bertholon had risen to go. Raoul felt suddenly enraptured.

"You know," he whispered softly, "that I love you, dear Aurette."

This cry from the heart was perhaps not very eloquent, but it touched Aurette in the innermost fibre of her soul. She looked at Raoul with an expression of love so intense and ingenuous that he was deeply moved, and imprinted upon her hand, which he still held within his own, a passionate kiss.

Aurette was silent; she was realizing her dream. Would it always be thus? Could she feel such happiness and live? She suddenly had a vision of their nuptials; in the great Cathedral at Angers, she was walking near Raoul to the altar, crowned with flowers and gleaming with lights; he placed the marriage ring upon her finger. Ah, what a steadfast, faithful wife she would be until death!

He relinquished the loyal hand which had not returned his pressure, so overcome with emotion was Aurette, and went to join his mother, who feigned not to have witnessed this scene.

The adieus were made as between persons who see each other often, and soon the noise of the wheels on the gravel died away in the tranquil air of the peaceful June night.

When the park gate closed behind the carriage, Mme. Bertholon turned to Raoul, and said in English, so that the coachman might not understand:

"It is not necessary to go too far with Mlle. Leneil; you were wrong to kiss her hand so early."

Raoul made an impatient gesture, and finally responded in French:

"Why, mamma, this is unreasonable! You forget that we are to be married in three months."

"I know what I am talking about," replied his mother, still in English. "So long as a marriage has not taken place it may be broken off, and I dislike complications."

Raoul took refuge in his corner and did not respond. When the carriage stopped at the door, he assisted his mother to the house, but instead of entering, he went to join his companions at a fashionable coffee-house.

CHAPTER II.

"Father," said Charles, laying his hand lightly upon M. Leneil's shoulder. His sisters and Sidonie had retired to their rooms, and his father was reclining upon a sofa near the drawing-room door, quietly enjoying the splendor of the night.

"I thought you had gone out, Charles," said he with a shade of surprise in his voice.

"I only took a short walk in the park, for I wish to have a talk with you."

"This evening?"

"This evening, if possible. I have had a care on my mind for some time, and you can give me relief; you are so good."

"Care, at your age! Are you in trouble about business matters?"

"No; all is safe in that direction."

M. Leneil sighed deeply.

"Tell me then," he said.

"I wish to marry," replied Charles with a painful effort.

His father looked grave, but not surprised.

"You are twenty-seven; you are right; it is time. Have you made your choice?"

"Yes," said he in a low voice.

Then he was silent; M. Leneil raised his head; their eyes met, and Charles knew that his secret was divined.

"Tell me her name," said his father slowly, with a serious air.

"You know it—it is Sidonie."

This name as it fell from his lips seemed to resound in the silence of the profound night which hung over all space, pierced only by the light of gleaming stars. His father's eyes were fixed on the darkness, while his son breathlessly awaited his answer.

"Father," said he, "I love her."

M. Leneil rose and went to lean against the door which led out on the terrace; never before had he appeared so tall to Charles.

"You love her," said he, "knowing that there is a stain upon her family, and that I would never consent to the marriage."

"Father," said Charles with a bowed head, "I have not sought this love; it has come—"

"So! it is she!" interrupted his father, angrily. "I have seen it! I have not been deceived, but I was not willing to believe it, it seemed to me so odious! She said that she did not desire to marry! She knew that she could not expect to do so in a town whose strict notions of—"

"It is not her fault!" exclaimed Charles irritably.

"Her father's conduct and death! Who said it was her fault? I am neither so cruel nor unreasonable. Still, the fault exists. Sidonie is innocent of it; so be it; but if any one must suffer, is it not natural that it should be she, instead of others?"

"Suffer, why?"

M. Leneil made a gesture of impatience.

"Do you not know that we live in a provincial town? Every one is familiar with the scandal, and it has been repeated and exaggerated till it has reached vast proportions. In Paris a man's crime is soon forgotten; in a province, it follows him to the grave. I will never give my consent for you to marry Sidonie!"

Charles felt his anger rising before this just opposition.

"It will be a cruel injustice!" said he, under his breath.

"Do you wish me to speak more plainly?" said M. Leneil, approaching his son with a menacing air. "Very well, hear it! It is not only because Sidonie is the daughter of a dishonest man, a suicide; but it is because she has neither rectitude, nor kindness of heart. It is because she has won you secretly, knowing that I would never give my consent to the marriage; it is because for several months, under your father's roof, in the house with your sisters, you have carried on with her an unavowable intrigue!"

"Father!" cried Charles, springing to his feet," do not insult her! she is above reproach."

"I hope so!" replied M. Leneil, disdainfully, "But do you think that I desire for a daughter one who has repaid my kindness by turning you against me, and by acting treacherously in the dark? For this alone, I would not wish her in my family."

He paced the floor restlessly for a few moments, then becoming less excited, he approached his son.

"Understand, Charles," said he, "that I should regret that there should be any misunderstanding between us. For the first time in our lives, we are not in harmony; until now you have been a tender, affectionate son. I was—I am—proud of you. You

have been an honor to my name. My paternal love and wisdom should make me warn you of a danger of which you are unsuspicious, of a future of which you have no presentiment; an imprudent, ill-assorted marriage will weigh upon your whole life. Sidonie is not the woman you need; you must not marry her."

Charles trembled with suppressed anger.

"If you hate her so," said he, "I don't understand why you have brought her up with my sisters."

"Hate her! I hate her so little that I have set aside a dowry for her, for the day when some man shall demand her for his wife; a man with a different mind from my own. But I know her very little. I believe that she is egotistical and careless of the happiness of others. I did not dream that she was false and artful. Even though she were the daughter of an honorable man I would not wish her for your wife."

Charles made a gesture full of bitterness and rage.

"Later on," continued his father, "you will thank me."

"Do not count upon that," said Charles starting toward the door. He stopped upon the threshold.

"And now," he said, "she is going to suffer because I love her; you will punish her because of the passion with which she has inspired me."

"Punish her? She merits it surely; but I am not a wicked man. Did she know it was your intention to speak to me to-day?"

For the first time in his life Charles spoke a falsehood to his father.

"No," he said, averting his eyes; and M. Leniel believed him.

"Then I will say nothing to her. To-morrow you will leave for Paris, and will remain there until I recall you. This will give me time to make a decision. Do not fear that your sisters or I will be unkind to her; were I tempted to be, Aurette would defend her. I will decide in ten days. Good night."

Charles was about to leave the room, but his father called him back.

"I am not a man of vain words," said he, "and never"—he emphasized the word—"will I give my consent, with a good heart, to your marriage with Sidonie. You could, no doubt, marry her without my consent, but you would not be willing to do that. No, Charles, I do not believe that you would give me such a cruel blow. You say that she

does not deserve to suffer; neither do I, my dear son, deserve to suffer through my children. As far as I was able, I have been a true father, an honest man and a good citizen. Do not sadden my old age."

He held out his hand, almost hesitatingly, but Charles seized it and pressed it to his lips. M. Leniel drew him to his breast and held him there.

"We will endeavor to make her happy," said he, releasing his son from his embrace, "I will double the sum I have laid aside for her dowry; we will carry her away to watering-places, to the sea-shore, and next winter, if necessary, to Paris. I will find a good husband for her there—some brave man; all the world is not so prejudiced as in the provinces. She will be happy; you are not a child, and you will soon rise above it—you will console yourself ere long. Your father will sustain you in doing your duty."

He spoke with the assurance of a man who had tested life, and who knew the nothingness of human passions; but Charles was young and did not look at things in the same light. He merely pressed his father's hand and left the room without responding. M. Leneil leaned in the embrasure of the window, and

watched the stars twinkling so mysteriously in the dark heavens. His heart was very heavy. Had he merited that this orphan whom he had so kindly sheltered should bring upon him the greatest grief which he had known since the death of his beloved wife? How cruelly she had recompensed his charity!

He remained there lost in thought till Aurette's light step upon the floor awakened him from his meditation.

"What! Are you not asleep yet?" he asked with some inquietude.

"No, papa. I heard you conversing with Charles, you know my window opens above the terrace, so I came—."

"As usual, to bring me consolation?"

"Some of it; but I knew of whom you were speaking."

"He has told you?"

"No, but I discovered it long ago. She is young, papa, you must forgive her."

Her caressing arms were around his neck and her whole attitude demanded pardon for the lovers.

"Forgive her? Do you mean that I should permit them to marry?"

Aurette hesitated, then kissing him, she led him to an arm chair and closed the window to shut out the night air.

"You wish them to marry?" he repeated almost angrily.

"I hardly know," replied Aurette, drawing her chair very near to him. "You are the best judge of all which concerns the honor of our family, yet—"

She hesitated as if seeking a better way to express a vague sentiment.

"But what?" demanded her father with nervous impatience.

"It seems to me that this marriage is not altogether impossible," she said, after a moment of silence.

"Do you know how her father died? And do you know of his disgrace?" exclaimed M. Leneil.

"I know that neither his life nor death was exemplary; but papa, Charles is reasonable in one thing, at least; it is not Sidonie's fault."

"That I will admit!" said M. Leneil, nervously, "but her own conduct, the clandestine meetings, the intrigue carried on beneath my roof, in the same house with you and Julia; can you excuse this also?"

"I, papa, have nothing to excuse;" said Aurette,

with a gentle smile, "it is you alone who have a right to be offended, and it seems to me that—"

"Speak out!"

"Ah, well! that since you alone should be offended, you alone have the right to—oh! papa, I dare not speak it—to pardon!"

She took her father's hand and pressed it to her lips. He drew her to him gently.

"Aurette," said he, "believe me, a man is a better judge of such matters. It is a question of honor, my child, and morally, Sidonie has been dishonorable."

"It is also a question of love, papa. They love each other, and you do not know what they would suffer were they separated!"

M. Leneil looked at his daughter in surprise. He knew that she was devoted to her lover, but she was equally devoted to her family and her duties; had she then experienced emotions which he had never suspected?

"And you," said he, "do *you* know what they would suffer?"

Aurette blushed; the shell pink on her cheeks deepened into carnation, and she drooped her dark eyelashes. It was the first time her father had

questioned her in regard to her innermost thoughts, but she was straightforward and brave above all else, so she responded without hesitation.

"I am sure of one thing, at least. I have consented to marry Raoul Bertholon with your approval, papa, but, now, should it be necessary to renounce him, I—"

Overcome with the intensity of her feelings she could not proceed, and the tears glistened in her eyes.

"So," she continued, recovering herself immediately, "I greatly pity these two children."

She very naively treated her brother as a child, although he was several years her senior, but she had so long been accustomed to watch over the whole household (like a young mother) whose happiness was in her hands.

"Then," replied her father, "you think I should yield?"

"Yes papa."

"Have you thought of the effect such a resolution would produce upon the world?"

Aurette shook her head.

"Do we live for the world?" said she.

"No, but we live in the world. For example, without going any further, what would Mme. Bertholon say?"

"She is not very indulgent, it is true," responded Aurette, "but we will permit her to talk."

"And your betrothed?"

"Oh!" said she, with a beautiful smile of triumph, "if he takes it badly, he will not be like himself, and I shall love him no longer!"

She spoke in the sweet security of a trusting heart. The little scene that evening had given her a new faith in Raoul. Her father looked at her with tenderness mixed with compassion. Life would be rugged for this exquisite creature, too good, too pure, too ignorant of all evil.

"You see, papa, she said cheerfully, "I have a little plan; it is this: Charles will be returning to India before many months; permit Sidonie to join him at Paris, where they will be quietly married, and she will accompany him on his journey. We will announce their marriage after they are far away, and the gossip can do them no harm."

"But ourselves!"

"Oh! papa, I hope you and I are both superior

to such things! When they come back all will have been forgotten."

M. Leneil remained silent; at last he rose from his chair and said.

"Go to bed now; it is late. But I must tell you that I am not in the least convinced. Should I ever give my consent to what at this moment I have decided to refuse, Sidonie can never truly be my daughter, and I will never forgive her for the mortification which her ingratitude and disloyalty have caused me. Good night, my child."

He drew her to him and kissed her, and as she ascended the staircase before him, with her candle in her hand, he looked at her with the tender pride of one who possesses a rare and only treasure.

CHAPTER III.

The next morning Aurette was, as usual, the first one to enter the dining-room. Julia had left home for the convent at six o'clock. M. Leneil was generally the last to come down to breakfast. Sidonie appeared, more pale and silent than was customary; she kissed Aurette in an abstracted manner, then sat down and kept her eyes fixed on the door.

In vain did Mlle. Leniel endeavor to obtain from the companion of her childhood, some trivial word which would permit her to act as if nothing had happened. At last Charles came in, said good morning to his sister, extended his hand to Sidonie, then seated himself with an air of affected indifference.

Aurette's heart beat quickly. She was not very well versed in love affairs, but seeing them there together, she was convinced that they had met since the evening before; Sidonie, it was quite evident, knew the disposition of M. Leneil in regard to her.

"Should papa discover it," thought Aurette, "he would remain inflexible."

M. Leneil was unusually late this morning, and, happily, he was too engrossed in his thoughts to look around him when he entered. He took his seat at the table and immediately began to read the morning paper. After serving his chocolate, Aurette made a sign to Sidonie to follow her, thus leaving her father and brother tete-a-tete.

Sidonie endeavored to avoid her in the vestibule, but Aurette with a wonderful display of authority, pushed her before her into the drawing-room.

"Listen to me," she said, "How is it that you have allowed yourself to be influenced into acting so imprudently?"

Sidonie threw back her head with a scornful air.

"Fine words!" said she, "grand scenes! worthy of the romantic school of 1830. For the love of God, Aurette, spare me this. I am weary enough already, without your worrying me to death!"

Mlle. Leneil recoiled involuntarily; such language wounded and shocked her. Yet the natural forbearance of her disposition made her suggest an excuse for the erring girl and she reproached herself for her severity.

"I have no desire to worry you," she said, "but think for a moment what you have done, and what

interpretation might be placed upon it. If they knew—"

"They! Who?" asked Sidonie ironically.

"The servants!" replied Aurette, almost roughly. "If *they* knew that you had met Charles last night or this morning, in either case, clandestinely—"

"Well, this *is* absurd!" interrupted Sidonie, "your imagination has indeed led you astray! I did meet him yesterday evening, while you were conversing with M. Leneil. We were sitting on the stair-case, and when you opened the door, we separated. That is all."

It was very simple, surely; Aurette was confounded.

"You expected him there?" she said in surprise.

"Of course; it was a vital question to us, my dear! It is not very agreeable to remain in suspense."

"And if I had not gone down?" asked Aurette, fighting against a disagreeable conviction.

"We would have waited until you were asleep. I could exist no longer; it was necessary to know at any price."

These words she uttered under her breath, with a hidden force which raised her somewhat in

Aurette's estimation. As the victim of an overpowering, irresistible passion, Sidonie was much more excusable than she had imagined.

"You know now," said Mlle. Leneil, "that my father will never give his consent; at least not at present. This is what he has said to my brother."

"Yes, I am not of a good enough family, nor rich enough, probably."

"Do not be spiteful," said Aurette authoritatively, "you know well enough that money has nothing to do with it. As to family, my father might perhaps in time decide to overlook that, but—"

"When one doesn't wish to do a thing there is always a *but*," said Sidonie sarcastically.

"But," continued Aurette without noticing the interruption, "these clandestine meetings were insulting to my father."

"If I had demanded his permission to love his son, do you believe he would have given it?" said Sidonie.

"He would at least have had more respect for you!" retorted Aurette.

"He would more likely have shown me the door," said the orphan in a mocking tone. "I am prepared for it."

"Sidonie!" exclaimed Mlle. Leneil, in a firm, gentle voice, "I pray you not to be wicked. If you are unfortunate enough to have wicked thoughts, at least have enough control over yourself not to speak them to me. I have been a true sister to you since the day my mother brought you to our home. How well I remember that day! You were so pale and slender—your black dress made you look more so; you were weeping—"

Sidonie turned away her eyes.

"Here is another sister," said my mother to us. "You have perhaps forgotten it, but I remember it distinctly. I know that in embracing you I gave you all my friendship, and since then I have not withdrawn it, although—"

"Although I have been insupportable?" retorted Sidonie, without looking at her.

"No; but full of a pride that has at times rendered you unlovable."

The rebellious girl shrugged her shoulders in disdain.

"What could you expect of me? The humiliations to which I have been subjected were almost unendurable to me, and my life has been made wretched."

"Not here, surely!"

"Here, as elsewhere. It was not your fault, I will admit. But that is not the question. What is to become of me? You of course know your father's intentions."

"I know absolutely nothing. But Sidonie, we all wish you well here; even my father is ready to excuse you—"

"So far as to consenting to the marriage?"

"I do not know, I believe not; for the present, at any rate; later on, perhaps. He is so good; be attentive and respectful to him; show yourself submissive and repentant."

"Like the heroines of virtuous books? I can not play that role, Aurette; sensibility was never my strong point."

Aurette turned away from her impatiently. Although she knew that Sidonie made herself appear worse than she really was, it annoyed her to see her take such an attitude.

"I ask myself why Charles loves you!" she said with vexation.

"Why? there is no wherefore in these things. You love your great, dawdling affianced, and God knows I ask myself, on my side, what you can see

in him to admire! I love Charles and he loves me; that is all!"

She spoke with a sincere ardor which redeemed the harshness of her words. Without resenting the direct attack on Raoul, Aurette rejoiced to hear at last, something fall from this young mouth which spoke in her favor.

"If you love him truly," said she sweetly, "be patient and hopeful. For my part, I will use every effort to induce my father to consent to the marriage."

Sidonie looked at her with a singular expression in her eyes. She was not surprised at such a promise. As flippant and vain as she was, she could appreciate Aurette's superiority, and in her heart she had counted upon her as a probable auxiliary when the critical moment should arrive. Her indomitable pride had kept her from confiding in this elder sister, who was so wise and good.

For an instant the good and bad struggled in her inconstant soul, then Sidonie seized Aurette by the shoulder, and shook her with a kind of savage tenderness.

"You are goodness itself, and all the other virtues!" said she, playfully, "It is really tiresome to

live with so much perfection! It is humiliating, it is vexatious; it makes one wish to commit all sorts of follies. Aurette!"

"Well?" said Aurette, who was listening with a sad smile.

"If ever I am tempted to do anything very foolish or wicked, I will first think of you, and I believe firmly that the fear of grieving you will make me hesitate. If ever I commit a rash act, it will be because I have forgotten you."

Then Sidonie kissed Aurette so energetically that the blood receded from her delicate face; and went quietly out of the room.

In the meantime, M. Leneil had been conversing seriously with Charles. His daughter's idea of allowing the young people to marry, away from Angers, had removed some of the difficulties aroused by this projected marriage. The resolve to have Aurette's marriage take place beforehand had removed all others, from a worldly point of view. The situation became more clear; disengaged from all but the personal sentiments of a father.

M. Leneil was ready to suffer much for the happiness of his children. Had his son chosen a young girl from some poor but honorable family, and if,

before committing himself, he had consulted his father, he would have made no objection, for his was a generous soul.

But under the existing circumstances he was far from believing that a marriage with Sidonie would render Charles happy. In the near future he foresaw for him, not only the *ennui* and disappointments which come to a man from the outside world, but those of a more serious nature, which would emanate from his domestic life.

He did not believe in the disinterestedness of Sidonie's affection. He was certain that she had set about capturing his son with the sole idea of securing a position in the world. He desired, however, to give the young girl an opportunity to prove that her sentiments were more noble than those with which he had credited her, so he had decided upon a course which seemed to him entirely just: Charles must wait two years, and if when Sidonie reached her twenty-first year they both had remained constant, he would no longer withhold his consent. Up to that time inviolable secrecy should be observed, in default of which, all should be at an end between them.

In his heart, M. Leneil did not believe in the strength of Sidonie's affection to stand so long a test. He confided this decision to his son with a gentleness under which Charles could detect an inexorable firmness.

"During these two years," said he, "Sidonie will remain with us as in the past. There must be no clandestine correspondence; your sisters and I will keep you *au courant* of all which would interest you. If in the interval, you change your mind—"

Without noticing Charles' gesture of denial he continued:

"Sidonie will receive twice as large a sum as I had intended for her dowry; as much to render homage to your mother, who morally adopted her, as to offer a kind of reparation for any prejudice caused by your infidelity. If it is *she* who changes; if she should grow tired of waiting, she will only receive the portion I had reserved for her originally. Does not all this appear to you just and reasonable?"

"Father," said Charles, after a moment's hesitation, "it *is* just and reasonable, but two years is so long to wait!"

"Not when you expect to love a whole lifetime," replied M. Leneil. "If you marry Sidonie with my

consent, I must have some sort of guarantee of your happiness. Two years is long if one loves but a little; it is nothing when one loves deeply and sincerely. You will thank me later on for making you wait."

Without demanding or receiving a response, he rang the bell for a servant, to whom he gave the order to request Mlle. Sidonie to come to him. During the short time which elapsed before she appeared, the father and son remained silent.

Charles was agitated with conflicting emotions. He knew that his father had acted toward him with great moderation, and even kindness, but at the same time he was almost certain that Sidonie would not agree to his terms. If the two years of waiting appeared to him so hard to endure, it would be intolerable to the wilful, rebellious nature of his betrothed. He confessed to himself, not without a secret shame, that she had not awakened in him what was best and most noble in his being, and he felt vaguely that they would not be happy together. His nature, as fine and tender as Aurette's, needed a confidence and sympathy with which Sidonie was far from inspiring him. She irritated him as often as she charmed him, and if she had not desired it so

ardently, so violently, he would never have dreamed of marrying her; at the first sting of love he would have taken refuge in flight.

She desired it, and from the first her tyrannical disposition made her take advantage of the more yielding nature of her lover; her despotic young soul finding in him the submission so dear to a potentate. After awhile she really loved him as deeply as it was in her nature to love anyone; then the triumph of entering (she, the despised one, marked with original sin) one of the best families of the proud *bourgeoise* of Angers, the pleasure of being able to vanquish those who had scorned her, whetted her desire for the conquest. She wished to marry Charles Leneil, and she would do so at any price. Charles divined this partly, and it saddened him profoundly; but each time that his father spoke of the possibility of his giving up Sidonie, he felt a cruel pang at the mere thought of anything so terrible.

Sidonie entered the room with a haughty air, but with downcast eyes. The agitation and inquietude caused by suspense had given to her features, which were a little too pronounced, a rare delicacy which rendered her infinitely beautiful. M. Leneil remarked it and confessed to himself that his son was

not altogether to be blamed for being tempted by the piquant, fantastic charm of this beauty.

In a few words he told her of his decision, restrained from any severity by her attitude, outwardly proper, but which was entirely too correct to be natural. He did not look at her till he had finished speaking, and then she had lowered her eyes. Had he seen the glance she threw upon Charles, he would have instantly recalled his words, and thus have averted many misfortunes, but he did not see it.

"Do you accept my conditions?"

She bowed her head in assent, and left the room immediately, not daring to show any undue precipitation, however. What more could he ask of her?

Charles thanked his father in words which lacked warmth and sincerity. Had M. Leneil a right to expect more of him? Yet his paternal heart was wounded at this coldness. But his lofty philosophy and natural indulgence of heart inspired him with a feeling of pity for these two young people to whose union he was so bitterly opposed.

"After all," said he, "Charles cannot leave until to-morrow, so they will have ample time to say adieu to-day."

It was a long and painful day to every one. Until evening, Sidonie ostensibly avoided all occasion for conversation with Charles, whom she was now at liberty to regard as her affianced lover. She remained near Aurette, following her into every nook and corner with so much insistence that Mlle. Leneil grew weary of it.

After dinner, as usual, the whole family was assembled upon the terrace, but each one observed a lugubrious silence. At last, Aurette gave her father an imploring look which he comprehended. After some hesitation he addressed himself to Charles.

"Why not take Sidonie for a stroll in the park?" said he, "Aurette will keep me company."

His daughter thanked him with a tender smile, and the strange lovers, without uttering a word, or without glancing at each other, descended the steps together, and soon disappeared at the corner of a walk already enveloped in shadows.

The hour was exquisitely calm; the stars twinkled in the heavens, and one planet of a dazzling brilliancy, outshone the splendor of the clouds still rosy with the flush of sunset. The blackbirds whistled far and near in the groves embalmed with

honeysuckle. Aurette never forgot this evening; every star in the sky seemed to sink its diamond point into her heart.

The two lovers walked for a long time in the shadow of the great, dense trees. Now and then Sidonie's white dress would gleam in the darkness at the end of the avenue as they approached the house, to disappear the next moment as they turned into some other walk. They walked slowly and not a sound of either voice could be heard.

The interview was so prolonged that M. Leneil grew restless.

"Call them," he said to Aurette who sat beside him in silence.

As if his words had been wafted to them, the young people appeared upon the esplanade and returned to the house.

Charles shook hands with his father, kissed his sister and went immediately to his room. Sidonie sat down near Aurette, and remained silent and immovable, with her eyes fixed obstinately upon the avenue, now so dark and lonely, where she had just been with her lover.

This cold immobility weighed heavily upon M. Leneil, and he gave the signal for them to retire

much earlier than usual. Sidonie only left Aurette upon the threshold of her chamber, and kept her lamp burning until daylight, so that the ray of light under her door might be a sure guarantee of her presence. The next morning Charles was gone.

CHAPTER IV.

To the dwellers in the Nest, the following week seemed twice as long as usual, and each one ardently longed for Sunday, to interrupt the current of painful thoughts which destiny had so unexpectedly thrust upon them.

It was the second Sunday of the Consecration, and the same religious pomp would be renewed. Julia had been excused from taking any part in the procession on account of her extreme fatigue the first time, and she was to arrive at the Nest Saturday evening to remain until Monday morning. Aurette's heart stood still at the thought of announcing to her sister her father's verdict in regard to Charles and Sidonie. She knew that Julia would strongly oppose it, for even in her childhood, at the beginning of their life in common, she had never been able to feel any sympathy for a nature which was so different from her own. To have her for a sister-in-law would be to her intolerable! Aurette, although

a very courageous person, almost dreaded the outburst of rage from Julia, which she knew would follow her announcement of what had happened.

On her return from the convent, Saturday evening, her delicate face was pale with the heat and exhaustion, (for the young girl applied herself to her studies in a most arduous fashion, in order to have them definitely ended at an early day) and Aurette's heart was touched with pity. So she resolved to spare her, for that evening at least.

Since the departure of Charles, Sidonie had made herself impenetrable; she never alluded to her marriage; not a word of gratitude or of complaint ever passed her lips. To M. Leneil she was coldly polite, to Aurette she was indifferent, without being rude. She seemed to have forgotten the fit of brusque tenderness which had made her, for once in her life, express her true sentiments. To have seen her in this household, one could not have doubted, in spite of M. Leneil's restrictions, that her position was in reality changed.

The following day the two sisters prepared to attend mass at Saint Maurice; their father, who was suffering somewhat from the excessive heat, had

concluded not to accompany them, but advised them to take Sidonie with them.

When the carriage was announced Aurette knocked at Sidonie's door, but there was no response. After waiting a moment she entered and looked around her. This room was unlike the apartments of most young girls, inasmuch as there was nothing there to testify to the individuality of its occupant. It was more like the branch upon which a bird perches, than the nest where it dwells.

Having assured herself that Sidonie was not there, Aurette left the room, closing the door behind her, and went to send a servant in search of her.

To her great astonishment, she learned that Mlle. Sidonie had left on foot an hour previous, saying that she was going to mass.

"What a strange idea!" thought Aurette, "Always the same pride!"

She stifled a sigh; Julia descended the staircase ready to accompany her; there was no longer a means of deferring the disagreeable communication, so she resigned herself to it.

Contrary to her expectations, there was no angry outburst: Julia listened with downcast eyes and compressed lips, now and then uttering an

exclamation of surprise. When Aurette finished speaking, she still remained silent.

"Julia!" said she, "are you never going to speak again? It were better for you to unburden your soul at once!"

They were in the carriage alone, nearing the cathedral.

"I," said the young girl slowly, "consider it disgusting. If you wish to know what I think I will tell you."

"You must be indulgent," said Aurette, in a reproachful tone.

"I am not. One dismisses a chambermaid for less than this."

"Oh! Julia! Hush!"

"And a chambermaid would be less culpable. You know, Aurette, I always say what I feel."

"I hope that some day you will feel otherwise," said Aurette.

The carriage was crossing Saint Aubin street, not far from the cathedral, when Julia started violently.

"What is the matter?" exclaimed her sister.

"Yonder they are!"

"Who?"

"Charles and Sidonie!"

"You are dreaming; Charles is at Paris."

Julia shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

"I tell you that I saw them in that street, arm in arm."

"Where?"

"Stop, Joseph!" cried Julia.

The coachman stopped his horses, and Aurette looked in the direction indicated.

"You were mistaken," said she, with an expression of boundless relief.

Without responding, Julia stepped from the carriage and walked a short distance into Saint Aubin street. Greatly agitated, Aurette asked herself whether she should follow her, when she saw her stop before the *porte-cochere* of the hotel Cheval Blanc.

It was luncheon hour, and a number of gentlemen were walking in the direction of the hotel restaurant, which was famous for its cooking. Several officers from a neighboring garrison were chatting together, and a number of students in elegant uniforms from the cavalry school at Saumur were approaching the place in groups of two and three: all these stared at Julia to discover who was this audacious

young person. But she did not see them. Just as she stopped before the entrance, Charles, with Sidonie on his arm, disappeared at the corner opposite the little court. There were several town men in the crowd around the door who looked at Julia and wondered why the daughter of the rich M. Leneil was there alone at this hour. At last she grew conscious of her role, and with a dash of crimson on her cheeks she returned to the carriage just as Aurette had risen to join her.

"They are there," said Julia in a stifled voice, "in the restaurant."

At this moment their father's notary passed the carriage with his wife and children, on their way to mass. He lifted his hat to them, with an air as astonished as respectful, at seeing his client's daughters so excited and bewildered.

The officers and students at the *porte cochere* were looking toward the carriage exchanging humorous remarks.

"Are you certain?" demanded Aurette, who felt her ears burning, and a mist before her eyes.

"Entirely certain. You had better ask if, being at the Cheval Blanc, the whole world does not know it!"

Aurette felt the necessity of making an immediate resolution. Their agitation had been too pronounced to resort to half measures.

"Drive to the Hotel Cheval Blanc," she said to the coachman.

Joseph, more amazed than ever before in his life, obeyed. Aurette stepped out in the midst of the crowd of military men and civilians who respectfully made way for her. A waiter met her at the door with a napkin on his arm.

"Is my brother, M. Charles Leneil, here?" she asked in a firm voice.

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"Since last evening?"

"No, mademoiselle, only since half-past ten this morning."

"Is he in his room?"

"No, mademoiselle, he has just gone into the restaurant."

Another waiter who had drawn near nudged his companion in the side with his elbow. He did not know Sidonie, and would have been too discreet to reveal to a young man's family when he breakfasted at the restaurant with a lady!

"Very well," said Aurette, "do not disturb him. Many thanks."

She quietly walked back to the carriage, and being seated, gave the order to drive home. Two or three familiar faces appeared to her through the mist that rose before her eyes. She bowed to them without distinguishing one from the other. Julia, who was more the mistress of herself, took note of everything in a way to recall it later on.

Surprised at their prompt return, M. Leneil hastened to the steps to meet them. At the sight of the pale faces of the two girls he knew that some misfortune had befallen them, and far from suspecting the truth, his thoughts ran in an opposite direction.

"Has she committed suicide?" said he in a startled manner, suddenly seized with a mortal fear.

"My God!" cried Julia, springing to the ground and hastening to him. He looked at her without being able to articulate a word. Aurette took his other arm and together they almost carried him to a sofa.

"What has happened?" he said at last, his lips parched with anguish.

"Oh! nothing!" said Julia quickly, "only she is at this moment dining with Charles at the Cheval Blanc, in sight of the whole town."

M. Leneil looked alternately from one to the other, as if he hoped to hear that it was not true. With more calmness and circumspection, Aurette convinced him of the sad truth.

"Great God!" cried he, "What have they done? Dishonored us?"

"I do not know, papa; Charles arrived from Paris this morning at half past ten, and Sidonie left on foot, only ten minutes ahead of us," said Aurette.

M. Leneil rose with a strength of which he had not believed himself capable.

"I hope the carriage is still at the door," he said, "I must go there immediately."

"Papa," said Aurette in an imploring voice, "do not go alone, I beg of you!"

"Very well, I will take my valet on the coach box. Adieu!"

He embraced them hurriedly and stepped into the carriage which awaited him at the door. From the manner in which he gave his orders to Joseph, the old coachman understood that time was precious,

and in spite of the burning sun, never had his horses displayed more ardor.

Arriving before the Hotel Cheval Blanc, M. Leneil beckoned to a waiter who began to comprehend that the affair was growing serious.

"Is my son here?" he said briefly.

"I think so, sir, he was here a moment ago."

"Request him to come to me."

The boy went into the restaurant, now nearly deserted, where Charles and Sidonie, mute before their empty coffee cups, had the air of criminals rather than of two lovers alone in each other's company.

"M. Leneil wishes to speak to you, sir," said the waiter in an undertone.

"Come," said Charles to Sidonie.

She rose and followed him. He threw some money to the boy, then went out to the carriage. Everyone at the hotel hearing of an adventure, was assembled there as if by chance.

"Get into the carriage," said M. Leneil briefly.

Sidonie got in first.

"Sit beside me," said M. Leneil.

She obeyed. Her heart was beating wildly, but her countenance was unchanged.

"To the Nest," was his order to the coachman. "Take us by the Mall and the Boulevard, and do not drive too rapidly."

The carriage turned into the principal streets of the town which were gaily decked for the procession. A number of people were out of doors and at the windows arranging the decorations for the afternoon. Nearly all the tradesmen knew the rich banker and saluted him as he passed. The women were already cognizant of the strange episode of the morning, so they looked at Sidonie with more of curiosity than good-will. But she remained impenetrable and unmoved. Charles wished himself a hundred leagues away, and in spite of a great effort, he could not conceal his annoyance; M. Leneil returned the salutations, and endured the gaze of the curious, with a wonderful *sang froid.*

But at last the punishment came to an end, and the carriage turned into the road which led to the Nest. It was a relief no longer to be a prey to all those glances, but the crisis was imminent. Finally they arrived, and without delay the family united in the drawing-room.

With a gesture, M. Leneil dismissed his daughters;

his knees trembled beneath him, and he was compelled to sit down. The culprits remained standing.

"What was your object in behaving as you have done?" he demanded of them without any preliminary.

Sidonie did not respond; one would have said she had not heard. Charles looked his father in the face, with a mixture of pity and tenderness. He was an honorable young fellow, weak, but good and sincere; he was conscious of the wrong he had done, and his heart was torn with regret; then too, the role which he had played for several months had weighed heavily upon him, and he was almost happy to discard it at last.

"I came from Paris last night," said he. "Sidonie joined me a little before noon this morning in the cathedral, and we were about to start for the station without delay, when you found us. We intended to take the four o'clock train for Paris. You would have received the announcement of our departure before dinner, and we would have demanded your consent to our marriage."

"Why did you show yourselves together publicly?" asked M. Leneil.

For the first time, Charles comprehended the true import of his action, and it appeared to him in so odious a light that he was struck with terror. When Sidonie had convinced him that the two years' test decreed by his father was absurd and unendurable, fascinated by her, his mind confused by the subtlety of the arguments she employed, he had acquiesced in a scheme in which she almost forced him to take a part. He had performed it in a kind of moral torpor, mixed with nervous impatience, powerless to resist the spell which she cast over him. During their short separation he had received a letter from her daily, which kept him in a state of half- hallucination and left him no time for reflection; now, in the face of a direct interrogation, he felt that he had acted like a malefactor, so he bowed his head without responding.

Sidonie came to the rescue. She saw a strange light in M. Leneil's eyes, and she felt that she must bear her part of the responsibility.

"We knew," said she, "how you respected public opinion; it was the fear of public opinion that made you refuse to give a real consent to our marriage, for the test of two years was only a means to separate us eventually; we did not believe that you

would hesitate long after it was rumored in town that we were affianced."

"Do you know any gentleman who would take his affianced wife into a public restaurant?" said M. Leneil with terrible irony. "It is this: you knew that I would no longer refuse my consent to your marriage if they said you were my son's mistress! You thought that the old banker would honor his engagements; that he would not allow the world to say that he had not safely guarded you under his own roof. You have laid your plans wisely! And if by chance I decline to approve them?"

Sidonie lifted her chin, cast down her eyes and remained silent. Charles took a step toward his father who waved him back haughtily.

"Father," he cried, "I know that we are culpable; I feel it cruelly. I swear to you, however, that our only object was to obtain your consent more speedily."

"I understand," said M. Leneil with sarcasm.

"Sidonie is pure," continued Charles, "she has not lost her self-respect, and as great as our offense is, it is not so great as you seem to believe."

"Pure? Materially, that may be; morally, she is degraded. I would be glad to know, I say it in all sincerity, that you had taken this means to repair a

fault! You would then have invoked the excuse of youth and passion! Pure? She who has deceived, lied, betrayed! Go! you have succeeded! you will be my son's wife, but never my daughter!"

Sidonie kept on her mask of impassibility. His consent to their marriage, hurled at her like a curse, did not even make her tremble.

"You desire to be married promptly; you shall be in ten days. Your engagement will be announced this evening. Charles will leave for Paris this afternoon to remain until the ceremony. During this time Sidonie will stay here, but bear in mind, young woman, that the consequences of this act, sooner or later, in time or in eternity, will fall upon your head!"

In spite of her obduracy, Sidonie could not repress a rapid glance thrown at her accomplice; M. Leneil caught it in its passage.

"My son was good," said he, "and honest; he loved his father; he was esteemed by every one, and merited this esteem; you have destroyed a beautiful past; what future have you to offer, to replace it?"

"Father!" cried Charles, his eyes full of burning tears, and his heart devoured by remorse, "I implore you to have pity."

M. Leneil turned away his head without answering him.

"Some day," cried the unfortunate young man in a changed voice, "some day I will win back your love. You will not withhold your forgiveness when you see my repentance?"

"I cannot tell," replied his father, "yet you are my son, and I have loved you tenderly; but defend me from your wife! I will never forgive her! Leave me."

They left the room, like an Adam and Eve driven from a celestial Paradise. When they were alone in the vestibule, Charles turned to Sidonie with a look of despair.

"My life is ruined forever," said he, "My father will never forgive me."

"They always say that," she replied calmly, "but they always end by pardoning."

CHAPTER V.

Instead of coming an hour or two in advance, as was her custom, Mme. Bertholon arrived just as the bell rang for dinner; she was cold and smiling as usual, with an inexhaustible supply of small talk, with which she kept up the conversation at the table. Without being intimidated by Raoul's taciturnity, Julia's morose manner, the troubled expression on Aurette's face, or the visible agitation of M. Leneil, the monotonous flow of her conversation continued uninterruptedly. Sidonie alone replied to her, with a bravado which drew upon her indignant glances from Julia.

The wind was fresh and the terrace looked uninviting, so coffee was served in the drawing-room. When the servant had disappeared with the tray, M. Leneil approached Mme. Bertholon and spoke to her in an undertone of Sidonie's engagement and early marriage.

"Ah! really!" said she, "is it decided entirely?" My congratulations!" and nodding her head slightly

in the direction of Sidonie, she then looked at Aurette significantly.

"They told me of it in town this morning," she continued, leaving the embarrassed object of her contemplation, to turn again to M. Leneil, "but I hardly credited it. You know one hears such extraordinary things! If one believed all they say! But why is Charles not here? Has he gone?"

Julia felt an irresistible desire to say something disagreeable to Mme. Bertholon, and she would have perhaps done so, had it not been for the sorrowful manner in which Aurette regarded their father.

Sidonie replied with an air of modest sincerity.

"He was forced to leave for Paris, madam; he will return just before the marriage."

"Ah!"

This was all. Aurette, who was urged for some music, went to the piano and played several insignificant pieces. She felt in no humor to pour out her soul into her music, and it seemed to her that she was far above the earth, in some cold, dreary world where she could find no one who loved her.

Her lover's presence, which had made these Sunday evenings so sweet to her, now only increased

her agitation. Silent, and in an ill-humor, Raoul appeared so changed to her that she did not know him; she felt a desire to weep, like a little child frightened at the sight of a stranger.

The rolling of wheels on the gravel was heard long before the accustomed hour, and Mme. Bertholon rose and took leave of them with her same eternal smile, which was so cold that it almost seemed frozen.

"Oh!" cried Aurette, with an agitation altogether out of proportion to so trifling an occurrence, "I have forgotten my bouquet to-day! I beg you a thousand pardons, Madam."

"It makes no difference; it is of no importance, my dear," replied the old lady, never ceasing to smile.

"I am so distressed!" repeated Aurette. She looked at Raoul who was absorbed in contemplating the varnished tips of his boots. He approached her, however, and pressed her hand with so much force that it hurt her. When she felt his hand close on her poor bruised fingers, a warm glow stole into her heart, and she had quite recovered herself when she conducted her future mother-in-law to the carriage.

When they had gone, Sidonie took her candle in the vestibule, nodded a hasty good-night to the rest of the family, and went up to her room without a moment's delay. Aurette followed her father into the drawing-room, and Julia, who was accustomed to retire when she chose, drew her chair close to her sister.

"Aurette," said she, "it will be impossible for me to return to the convent as long as this marriage has not taken place. If for the next ten days, I hear this ridiculous episode repeated over and over again, I am capable of conducting myself in such a way as to lose the good name I have made for eight years of irreproachable conduct."

Aurette glanced at her father who was listening, and who bowed his head in acquiescence.

"Thank you, papa," said Julia. "Now another thing; if I am forced to endure Sidonie's presence here for ten days longer, I am equally capable of acting toward her in the rudest manner possible; and I believe you both feel the same way. What will you do?"

It was an embarrassing case. M. Leneil and his daughters discussed it for nearly an hour, and ended

by concluding that there was no escape from the mortifications which awaited them.

"It will be a tearful wedding," said Julia, "if one is not too much enraged to weep. Will you invite all of Angers, papa?"

They agreed that the marriage should be as simple as possible. They would send out a number of announcements immediately after the ceremony; the invitations to the wedding breakfast should be limited to four witnesses, selected from the most trusted and honorable of M. Leneil's friends.

"Ah well!" said Julia, when these details had been arranged; "if I am obliged to see her I need not speak to her; this is, at least, one consolation."

Embracing her father and sister, she said good-night and left them. M. Leneil remained alone with Aurette, who sat near him holding his hand. For several moments they did not speak, but their silence was eloquent, and never had they felt more intensely how greatly reciprocal love softens the ills of life.

"Mme. Bertholon is a strange woman," said M. Leneil, after awhile, "one never knows what she really thinks. She was perfectly familiar with it all before she came here."

"Think of it, papa! Not she alone, but there is not a respectable house at Angers in which they are not discussing our adventure, at this very moment!"

She spoke with a sad resignation, free from bitterness; since she had felt the pressure of her lover's fingers she had been full of a new courage.

"Sidonie must have a trousseau and a wedding dress," said Aurette.

M. Leneil turned away his eyes.

"Give her money for what is necessary," said he with a sort of disgust," I have reserved twenty-five thousand francs for her; you may take from this sum all that you need."

"Will you permit me to accompany her to make the purchases, papa? If you do not, people will think that you are opposed to the marriage."

"Which is the exact truth. No, she must go alone. It seems to me that now she ought to bear all the shame; do not expose yourself to useless suffering."

His daughter realized that he was right. They sat together conversing for a long time. Aurette did not leave him until she believed him sufficiently fatigued to sleep easily; she would have been frightened had she seen the dose of chloral which

an hour later he was forced to take in order to get a little rest.

Sidonie entered officially upon her role of fiancèe with graceful ease, and took complete possession of the carriage of her future father-in-law to visit the various shops to make her purchases, and order the most expensive costumes. Having infinitely good taste, she avoided the mistake of parvenues, and chose neither the most brilliant nor conspicuous in any fashion, but her wedding dress and traveling costume were so artistic that they made an epoch in a town where they knew well how to dress.

She would return to the Nest only at meal times. A feigned indisposition on the part of Julia explained her presence at home, and Aurette's non-participation in the preparations of her sister-in-law. Mme. Bertholon, in a coldly polite note, excused herself and son from dining with them the following Sunday.

"In order," she wrote, "not to hinder the preparations which must occupy all the time and thoughts of the inhabitants of the Nest."

M. Leneil, after reading it, handed the note to Aurette without commenting on it. Mme. Bertholon's diplomatic ways displeased him, but he anticipated, on account of the gossip of which his

family was now the object, an increased coldness on her part. He hoped, as soon as the marriage had taken place, to explain to her, through the mediation of her notary, that she would be unwise to change anything in the existing state of affairs, and knowing her interested, he resolved, if necessary, to greatly increase the dowry promised to Aurette.

The bans were no sooner published, than all his friends came by turns to entreat him not to yield so quickly to so unhappy an affair. The principal argument was that the young lady was not only compromised with Charles, but they attributed to her several other escapades; this marriage would not mend matters, and would only serve to awaken prejudice against his family. What could the wretched father reply? Even though he should forbid the marriage, would he not be blamed? So he contented himself with thanking his friends and assuring them of Sidonie's innocence. At night, in order to sleep, he was entirely dependent on soporifics, which he took in such quantities that he was almost unconscious, and several days before the marriage he was roused from this state of physical torpor by violent shocks, the result of his overwrought nerves.

Aurette, in great alarm, sent for the doctor, who instantly deprived him of his bromide, ether and chloral, and ordered baths to produce a drowsiness; and finally M. Leneil was sufficiently restored to be present at the ceremony on the day of the marriage.

"Should this last three days longer," he said to Aurette, "I could not exist; one cannot burn the candle at both ends without rapidly wasting one's life away."

The ceremony was performed on the appointed day. The cathedral, to which no one was invited, contained the whole town, (except their real friends, who refrained from coming) some of whom even climbed over the *prie-dieu* to see the bride. She walked proudly up the aisle with her head held high, but her eyes modestly cast down, and floating behind her were billows of white tulle looped with snowy orange blossoms. She was so beautiful that the spectators forgot to notice the bridegroom, whose pale, emaciated countenance could not have failed to call forth comment.

Aurette and Julia followed their father, attired in very simple robes, which were severely criticised. When the little *cortège* returned to the carriages,

Aurette was pained to see the waiters from the Cheval Blanc running to the street corner to admire the wedding party to whom they had so ably lent their assistance.

The breakfast was very unceremonious; the four witnesses were M. Rozel, the physician, the family notary, Charles' god-father, and an old cashier, who had been in the employ of the bank for more than thirty years. They were all reserved persons, and too familiar with the circumstances to endeavor to play a useless role. The repast was quickly over, and Sidonie went to her room to put on her traveling dress; the guests all took their leave, except M. Rozel, who decided to remain until the departure of the bridal pair, in order to see how his old friend would stand the inevitable prostration which would follow the intense excitement. Charles remained with them. He had endeavored to approach his father to speak affectionately to him, but M. Leneil avoided him. In despair, the unfortunate young man made a sign to the doctor to follow him into the park.

"I know what you desire," said the doctor, before Charles could speak, "You wish to obtain your father's forgiveness. I beg of you to pardon my

brusque frankness; I have been a friend of your family since the birth of your elder sister, and I sincerely mourned the loss of your adorable mother, who was so good, so generous—too generous. So I have a kind of right to consider myself one of you, and consequently at liberty to speak without evasion. It is useless to seek any understanding with your father at this time, and you must write him nothing of an exciting nature. You must treat him as a very sick man to whom a shock might prove fatal."

Charles bowed his head in sorrow.

"Doctor," said he, "do you think he will ever forgive me?"

After a moment's hesitation, M. Rozel replied:

"My dear boy, your father, thank God, is neither wicked nor foolish; he is deeply offended, but he will finally pardon his son; but it will take time."

"Do you think he will live long enough for me to win his forgiveness?" said Charles, lowering his voice.

Touched by a grief so profound, which sought neither evasions nor subterfuges, M. Rozel placed his hand upon the shoulder of the unhappy young man.

"I hope so, I hope so;" said he cheerfully, "you have a powerful advocate in your sister, Aurette. She has a noble soul, pure and compassionate. By her help, and for her, your father will recover, and if he lives, he will surely pardon you. I believe that he will refuse her nothing which she demands of him."

They walked alone in silence for a short time, when the doctor stopped Charles at the end of the avenue.

"Tell me," he said kindly, "why you did such an inconceivable thing. I do not wish to wound you, but if your object was to force your father's hand, why did you not go directly to Paris with her who is now your wife? It could have been done without scandal."

"Yes, I understand it now," said Charles sadly, "but I feared that my father, believing us illegally married, would continue to refuse his consent more firmly than ever."

"You thought this?" said the doctor with an incredulous air, "you know your father very little then."

As Charles did not respond, the excellent man divined truly that this bridegroom of a few hours

had very little to do with a scheme perfected in every detail by Sidonie.

When the moment for their departure arrived the young people went to take leave of their father. M. Leneil, with difficulty standing, received them coldly. To Sidonie he made a courteous, frigid bow. His son advanced to embrace him: he avoided a scene and contented himself with offering him his hand.

Charles felt the burning tears filling his eyes at the touch of that hand, so loyal, so tender, which responded so feebly to his pressure. He would gladly have given his life at this moment to have undone the suffering he had caused his father the past month. But there is no reparation in regrets, and the irrevocable was accomplished.

Sidonie coldly touched the lips of Aurette and Julia, then left the house, followed by her husband, who had lingered a moment to hold his elder sister in his arms and to whisper in her ear his last injunctions.

"Love him, care for him, teach him to forgive me; write to me, write to me often; tell me everything, oh! my dear sister!"

She pressed his hand tenderly, with a look which warned him to spare their father, and he tore himself from the beloved old Nest whose doors he had opened to so many sorrows.

When they had really gone, M. Leneil looked about him with a bewildered air.

"I am very tired," he said, putting his hand to his brow, "and I wish to sleep; will it harm me, doctor, to rest for a moment here on the sofa?"

"Not the least in the world; lie down, my dear friend; nothing shall disturb you."

He assisted the invalid to make himself comfortable on the spacious ottoman, then closed the blinds, which gave a delicious freshness to the room. M. Leneil was soon asleep, and the doctor, who had watched with some misgivings the beginning of this sleep, left the arm chair where he had been sitting and beckoned Aurette to join him in a distant corner of the room.

"Now," said he, "be calm at any price. He must not be disturbed for a long time. I hope he will soon be restored to health, but I can answer for nothing if he is agitated with new troubles. You are no longer a child, Aurette; as his physician I take all upon myself, and am ready to suffer the

consequences; from this moment you must conceal all letters from him, open all packages, give all signatures. If anything disagreeable happens—"

"But, doctor, if it should concern the future of the family?"

"You are discreet enough to know how to act under the circumstances. Besides, you have M. Richard for temporal affairs, and me, if I may dare say it, for spiritual ones. Do you understand? In a few weeks I hope to surrender your father to you in good health and capable of resuming his ordinary life. I must now return to my patients."

He departed, and two hours later M. Leneil awoke, feeling refreshed, but so weak that he resolved to retire immediately. After assisting him to bed, Aurette gave him a broth and left him to fall into a tranquil sleep. She then went to join Julia at the dinner table.

It was very lonely for the two young girls in the great dining-room, which in the past had been so full of life and gayety; so they remained there as short a time as possible, and went immediately to Aurette's room which was on the same floor with M. Leneil's sleeping apartment, and permitted

them to keep an effectual surveillance through the wide, open doors.

"The mail, mademoiselle," said a servant, presenting a tray covered with sealed envelopes.

Aurette took the packet and walked to the window; it was nearly dark and she could scarcely see to read.

"You can do that to-morrow," said Julia, "have you not had enough to fatigue you to-day?"

"Some of them might require an immediate response," replied Aurette, "you know papa never leaves a letter unread a moment after it is received, and most of these arrived this morning! I must do as he does when I am in his place temporarily."

She lighted two candles and placing them on a table near her, began to look over the mail.

They were for the most part communications of no importance; there were several letters from distant friends who, not having heard of the scandal, sent their congratulations in the simplicity of their souls.

Aurette arranged these with a sigh.

"I do not know if they will be pleasant to poor papa or not," she said, "I will give them to him later on.

A MIST ROSE BEFORE HER EYES.—Page 93.

One envelope remained unbroken. This one was without a stamp or postmark; Aurette recognized the fine, angular handwriting of Mme. Bertholon. Julia, who was watching her, saw her hesitate as if she feared to open it.

"Why do you hesitate," she asked, "tomorrow is Sunday; she writes to say that she will come, or will not, according to her fancy, Make haste and read it, I am almost asleep."

Aurette broke the seal slowly; it was addressed to her father: after perusing the first words a mist rose before her eyes, and the hand which held the letter fell upon the table. Julia, greatly alarmed, rose and leaning over her shoulder with her arm around her waist, began to read. These words met her eyes:

"DEAR SIR: Up to the last moment my son and I have hoped that you would see that the projected marriage of M. Charles would bring a grave prejudice upon your family. Not having been consulted we have no advice to give, but we have reflected none the less during the ten days which have elapsed, and our reflections have caused us much chagrin. However, we wished to wait hoping you would change your mind. The marriage of

your son having taken place this morning there is no longer any resource for us against a deed which must change all our plans for the future. Notwithstanding the great merits of Mlle. Aurette, we feel, my son and I, that it will be impossible for us to entertain the thought of an alliance with the young Mme. Leneil, and with the assurance of his profound regret, my son begs you to restore his freedom.

Believe me, dear sir, your sincere friend,

CORALIE BERTHOLON."

"It is not possible!" cried Julia, when she saw the signature.

A slight movement in M. Leneil's room riveted her to the spot, terrified, pale with excitement.

Aurette lifted her hand to command silence.

The regular breathing of the sleeper was restored and the young girls looked into each other's eyes with an expression of nameless horror.

"Give me the letter to read again," said Julia in a low voice. But her sister kept it clutched in her hand and refused to surrender it.

"What good will it do?" said she, "you have read it. I am not greatly surprised. I anticipated this."

"And said nothing!"

"What good would it have done? When I say I anticipated it, I do not mean this, but I suspected that Mme. Bertholon was not pleased."

"The old witch! the wicked woman!" said Julia under her breath. "What perfidy, what cruelty! You know, Aurette, she will try now to find a richer girl for her great booby of a son—"

"Julia, I implore you to hush!" said Aurette, whose pale cheeks were suffused with a deep crimson.

"And he, what an idiot!" continued Julia, not able to suppress her wrath, "he has not a word in which to defend himself, or you!"

"You must give him time!" exclaimed Aurette in a generous outburst of indignation. "His mother wrote this letter, and how do you know if he has ever seen it!"

"Ah! how you love him!" said Julia leaning over and pressing her cheek against the golden hair of her "little mother." "He should be a hero to be worthy of you!"

"Hush!" murmured Aurette in confusion. The young girl's eyes were hollow, and a deep wrinkle was clearly marked upon her brow by the grief which had come to her; she was a hundred times

more beautiful thus, but it was a tragic beauty born of a great sorrow.

"We must, above all else, conceal this from papa!" she said, folding the letter with a firm hand and slipping it into her pocket, "then we must talk it over, for this letter must have an immediate response. And now it is time to go to bed to get a little rest, for we do not know what the next few days may bring forth, and we must reserve all our strength."

Julia looked at her in astonishment. This firmness and courage seemed to her supernatural; she feared that it was the beginning of madness.

"Aurette," said she," do you understand the true import of this letter?"

"Be calm; I comprehend; for even should M. Bertholon resist his mother, my happiness is ruined forever. You know, Julia, what a marriage is without a parent's blessing and approval."

"Oh! but this is different!"

"It would be the same thing. Papa would never consent for me to enter the family of Mme. Bertholon if she opposed it, and I—"

She turned away her head with a look of scorn, not unmixed with sadness.

"Yes, my happiness is ruined," repeated the young girl in a low voice, "but papa's life is worth more than my happiness, and for the present, I should think of this alone. Good-night."

But Julia stood there indecisive, with the tears glistening in her eyes, and her dry throat convulsed with sobs. Aurette sat immovable and silent for a long time; suddenly she rose, and throwing up her arms, fell upon the bed with her face buried in the pillows. Julia's first thought was to ring for help, but she remembered her invalid father whose life would be imperilled at the least emotion. With a presence of mind far beyond her years, she threw open the window, then ran to a little closet where her sister kept the medicines, and finding the ammonia, she returned to Aurette's inanimate form, and in a few moments she was restored to consciousness.

"What is the matter?" said the poor girl passing her hand over her eyes. But memory soon brought back her sorrow and she began to search for her pocket.

"The letter," said she, "hide it so I may not lose it—that papa may not know it."

Her trembling fingers wandered over the paper without being able to grasp it. Julia took the letter and placed it in her corsage, and assisted her sister to undress. Aurette was so weak that she could not stand up, and she allowed herself to be put to bed without resistance.

"Poor Julia," said she, "here you are with two sick children on your hands; but to-morrow I will be well. Go now and take some rest."

Julia went to her room but returned in a few moments dragging a pillow and a blanket which she spread upon the carpet.

"I will sleep here," she said," for if papa should call, what could you do?"

Aurette made an effort to respond, but she could not speak; moving her hand feebly, she endeavored to draw her sister's face to her own, but her strength failed her; the beneficent tears flowed down her cheeks, and hiding her head in the pillow she wept bitterly.

CHAPTER VI.

After a refreshing sleep, at a late hour next morning, M. Leneil awoke. As it often happens at some crisis in life, when a dreaded deed is accomplished, his sorrow seemed less terrible to endure, than when awaiting it anxiously; the grave had closed over the dead, he must employ himself with the living.

His first care was for Julia, whom he found next morning, pale with fatigue. Yet in that night of inquietude passed upon the floor near her sister's bed, the young girl had found a new energy, which soon made her eyes shine and brought a brilliant color to her cheeks.

Reassured in that direction, he turned his attention to his eldest daughter. Aurette had received a shock which would leave its mark upon her whole life, and her sweet face bore its ineffaceable trace. And yet she did not know the extent of her affliction; she did not believe Raoul his mother's accomplice. She expected some word, some act,

which would attest to his dignity as a man and a lover. She was sure that he would write, and was willing to make any excuse for the neglect of a few hours necessary to a reparative step.

Still, she resented the unmerited affront to herself, to her father, and to the whole family; she was indignant at the heartless cruelty, the ill-disguised brutality of a woman without a sentiment of loyalty in her soul. She could understand why her brother's marriage should for awhile estrange certain sympathy and respect from them, but to break off thus abruptly, with no pretext, no excuse, it was unpardonable.

Her habit of confiding everything to her father made it almost intolerable to conceal this from him. Twenty times before breakfast she was on the point of telling him all. The long spell of weeping in which she had indulged during the night had left her with a severe headache which she plead as an excuse for her inflamed eyes and pale face.

M. Leneil was weak and drowsy, and his mind, so overtaxed during the preceding ten days, did not possess its usual activity, so he accepted the explanation as entirely natural, and simply advised her to

ask the doctor for something soothing for the headache.

M. Rozel arrived just as they were assembled at the breakfast table. His quick eye immediately discovered that there was some new cause for trouble, and when he was assured that M. Leneil was as well as could be expected, he turned his attention to Aurette, watching her stealthily, endeavoring to divine the reason for her despondency; but without success.

He rose to leave immediately after breakfast, giving his patients in town as an excuse for his early departure. He proposed to Aurette to accompany him a part of the way in his phaeton, which he was driving himself, so that she might return on foot.

"There is nothing like exercise," said he, "for your moral and physical welfare! You will be a new creature after this little walk."

Aurette was too eager to talk freely with her wise counsellor not to accept his invitation, and they started off together. They had hardly left the Nest, when M. Rozel turned the corner in an opposite direction from Angers, and drove slowly down a shady road.

"What has happened?" said he to his young friend, "I hope it is nothing serious."

Aurette had kept a brave countenance during breakfast, and under her father's eye she restrained herself to the point of discarding from her mind for the moment the terrible thought. This direct interrogation from the doctor revived the horror of the first shock with such force that the young girl moved her lips several times before she was able to utter a sound; her throat was parched as in a dream when one longs to cry out and cannot make one's self heard.

"What! what!" exclaimed M. Rozel uneasily.

With a superhuman effort Aurette succeeded in pronouncing the four words which had ruined her life.

"My marriage is broken off."

The good doctor pulled so hard on the reins that his little pony came to a stand-still. Touching him with his whip he said calmly:

"You are ill, Aurette; this cannot be!"

She drew from her pocket a small portfolio, and took from it Mme. Bertholon's letter. Handing it to him she took the reins to drive while he read it, rocked by the gentle motion of the phaeton.

"What a foolish woman!" he exclaimed, folding the letter carefully and returning it to her. His kindly grey eyes rested upon Aurette's tired face with profound pity.

"And this precious son," said he, "has he made no protest?"

"I do not know. I hope—I believe that he will write something—"

"Or has already done it," interrupted the doctor, "I am sure that his mother has not consulted him; he would not have permitted her to send such a letter. It is a little, mean act, of which women alone are capable. This letter is coarse, another reason for believing that Mme. Bertholon consulted no one but herself."

They drove along the shady, level road for some moments in silence.

"Tell me, Aurette," said the doctor at last; "for you can speak to me as a father; has this wounded you greatly?"

She answered him bravely, but with trembling lips.

"Greatly."

"Is it wounded pride or love?"

"It is not so much my pride," said she, turning away her head.

The doctor gathered up his reins and the pony struck a brisk trot.

Raoul Bertholon, the booby, the simpleton, as he called him in his mind, to inspire a sincere love, a kind of passion in this exquisite Aurette! It was humiliating to her! But one loves where one may, and she had never compared him with any other man; this is what the good doctor offered to himself as a kind of excuse.

"Doctor," said Aurette at the end of a mile, "are they talking very badly of us at Angers?"

"Badly? Well, yes; not of you, though. Your brother and his wife are being rudely handled; Charles has received a blow from which he will not soon recover. I do not doubt that they are saying ten times as many slanderous things of Sidonie as she deserves, but I am not very indulgent to her, myself. Just or unjust, the gossip about her disturbs me very little. It would not affect me at all if it did not rebound on the innocent. But what is done, is done; it is useless to regret it. I must add, not only to console you, Aurette, but for the love of truth, that Mme. Bertholon will be universally censured, even by those who have been most severe on the culprits. One must respect propriety; she

should have sought some pretext, or at least not acted so hastily—"

"I prefer that it should be settled at once," said Aurette quickly, "not for poor papa, who will receive it as a mortal blow, but for myself. I hate ambiguous situations; suspense seems to me to be the greatest suffering of which we are capable, and I prefer the certainty of a misfortune than to be eternally expecting it."

"She loves this simpleton, and still believes in him," thought the doctor. "She has more sorrow in store for her, even after this terrible blow."

"Ah! well!" said he aloud, "prepare yourself for rude treatment, my poor child! In your father's state of mind and body the whole care of the family falls upon you. I will help you to bear it. The notary is a brave man, but he has a wife and three children, so expect no help in that direction, for you would run the risk of falling into endless complications. You and I—"

"And Julia," added Aurette, with a look of tender pride. "If you only knew how she cared for me; with what coolness and presence of mind! I did not know her until last night."

The doctor turned his pony's head toward Angers.

"I have entirely forgotten my patients," he said, "and I am sure they are needing me. So Julia has shown herself a good sick nurse? Does she ever speak now of being a sister of charity?"

"Not since the *Fète-Dieu.* But why do you ask me this?"

"Because it seems superfluous to me for her to go to exercise her Christian duties in the outside world, when there is so much to be done in her own home. She is young, and she will perhaps learn life in a rougher school than the postulants! But, Aurette, here are my commands: The same absolute quiet for your father; for yourself, silence and resignation. As to Mme. Bertholon's letter, do not answer it. I will tell her that the least emotion will endanger your father's life. I may be able to obtain from her—not a retraction, for you do not wish it—"

"Oh! no!" sighed Aurette.

"Will you confide to me this remarkable epistle? I will not promise not to relinquish it to her, but I may probably bring you another in its place."

Aurette silently acquiesced, and handed him the letter.

"Here is the Nest," said he, "I will put you out at the park gate. Say to Julia that I am pleased with her, and that if she is very wise I will take her with me to my clinic and teach her to dress wounds. I know she is dying to go with me. Good-morning."

Bowing affectionately to Aurette, and touching his horse gently with his whip, the good man was soon out of sight.

Before joining her father and sister, Aurette stopped in the hall to inquire of a servant if there had been any visitor since she left the house. There was no letter for her! The slight flush which the drive in the fresh air had brought to her cheek quickly faded; she breathed heavily, as if to gain strength, then went to join the others.

CHAPTER VII.

Doctor Rozel, so gentle, tender and prudent with his patients, had the reputation of being a terrible hand at a moral operation. So Mme. Bertholon, who knew of his intimacy with the Leneil family, was little pleased to learn that he had called to make her a visit.

The news of M. Leneil's serious illness had reached her that morning in town, where the inhabitants were occupied principally in gossiping about the young couple who had just taken their flight. The old lady's active mind immediately suggested a correlativeness between her letter and the doctor's visit, and she believed that he had come to tell her of his friend's illness.

Having decided to inform him that the affairs of M. Leneil no longer concerned her, she entered the parlor more icy in her manner than usual, and it was with the temperature below zero that she offered him a chair. Without appearing to notice that the seat was, morally, at least, a block of ice, he settled himself comfortably in it, as if for a long stay.

He began by speaking of commonplace matters, such as the excellent state of health of the town, a contemplated change in the garrison not imminent, and when Mme. Bertholon was exasperated almost beyond endurance, he said to her abruptly:

"I have just come from Bird's Nest. My friend, M. Leneil is suffering greatly."

The mercury in Mme. Bertholon's moral thermometer congealed instantly. Her face seemed to say by its blankness; "I do not know why you should speak to me of people who are nothing more than strangers to me."

But M. Rozel was not to be disturbed by such a trifle.

"As his physician," he continued, "I am anxious that he should be spared all emotion, good as well as bad; his two daughters are angels—"

Mme. Bertholon slightly elevated her eyebrows, as much as to say: "Julia too!" but her grey eyes continued to reflect the icebergs of the polar regions.

"However, they cannot ward off all disagreeable things. I have said to them: 'My poor children, you fill your role admirably, but no one can cope with the impossible. Should my friend Leneil die of a shock, as he is liable to do, I will proclaim it far

and near that you have done all you could—so much the worse for those upon whom the responsibility of this misfortune will fall. I will be merciless to them.' I have said this to them, madam, and I have at least rendered homage to the truth."

Circulation seemed to have suddenly been restored in Mme. Bertholon. She opened her lips, not without an effort, however.

"Is he then so ill?" she asked uneasily.

"Rheumatism complicated with *endocardite* is always very dangerous."

She did not comprehend him, but she was no less impressed.

"You, who will so soon be connected with the Leneil family—"

Mme. Bertholon could not repress a gesture of indignant denial.

"What!" exclaimed the doctor, "is not your son affianced to Mlle. Aurette?"

"Do not feign ignorance any longer, M. Rozel," said she, "you know that I have withdrawn my word."

"The doctor bowed politely to her, then drew from his pocket-book the letter which Aurette had entrusted to him.

"DO YOU WISH A COMPROMISE?"—Page 111.

"Perfectly well, my dear madam," said he with great urbanity," here is the proof with your signature. What would you say should I inform you that while reading it, my friend Leneil drew his last breath in my arms?"

Mme. Bertholon gazed at him intently; his countenance was impenetrable, and she was truly alarmed.

"Do not jest, sir," she said, "this is a serious matter."

"Be assured, madam, if it were not serious, I would not have the honor of being in your house at this moment. Do you wish a compromise?"

"A—what?" replied the old lady haughtily.

"I said a compromise," repeated the doctor, dwelling on the word. "The sea is superb at this time of the year; the coast is not so rough as it will be in six weeks from now; this is the right season to make a tour of Brittany, or of Arcachon if you prefer the woody coasts of resinous trees. Your health requires the sea breeze; or perhaps you would prefer to spend a month or two at some watering place. I am ready to prescribe—"

"Sir!" interrupted Raoul's mother with indignation which she could no longer suppress.

"Then," continued M. Rozel calmly, "before going you must write to M. Leneil, that being forced to absent yourself suddenly, you will not have time to go to take leave of him and his daughters; you will add, that upon your return it will give you pleasure to see him again. And then, you must write to him once or twice during your absence. Your letters have never been very gracious, so then your coldness will not astonish him. Upon your return, if you have not changed your mind, Mlle. Aurette will write you that after reflection she has concluded that she cannot marry your son."

Mme. Bertholon had listened attentively to these words.

"But," said she, "suppose I refuse to carry out this little scheme you have so cleverly devised?"

M. Rozel pointed to the letter which he still held between his thumb and forefinger.

"Should you not accede to what I have proposed," he replied, "I will be responsible as the physician and friend of the family, and will be forced to give to the public the document which led to such grave troubles in the present state of my patient's health. It will be impossible, don't you understand, as clear as his mind is, to keep him in ignorance more than

a few days longer of a deed which concerns him so deeply."

Mme. Bertholon remained immovable, reflecting profoundly. Doctor Rozel possessed an enviable reputation as an honorable man in all respects; his word was an article of faith among his enemies as well as his friends. She held out her hand for the letter.

"Give it to me," she said briefly.

"Hold, hold, my dear madam!" said the doctor, still retaining the letter.

She rose, and going to a small writing desk near the window, sat down, and after putting on her eye glasses, she dipped her pen into the ink and without looking at the doctor said: "Dictate!"

"Excuse me, dear madam," said M. Rozel, modestly, "but my friend would lose much pleasure in reading this letter if it did not emanate from you!"

She leaned over the paper and traced in her stiff, angular handwriting a dozen lines, expressing her regrets at being obliged to leave without bidding adieu to her friends at the Nest. When she had finished she scattered upon the letter a pinch of gold sand and handed it, open, to the doctor, who took it and read it tranquilly.

"This is perfect," said he, "we will now enclose this in the envelope of the other letter, and the first time that my friend Leneil asks for his mail, we will give him this one. Mlle. Leneil will not delay in making the determination of which I have spoken to you, which will terminate this unfortunate affair. I am your humble servant, madam."

He was on the street before Mme. Bertholon had time to recover her senses. The attack was rough certainly, as it was necessary to be in order to vanquish her; it would be terribly hard for her to leave people to believe that the rupture came from the Leneil's side.

Doctor Rozel looked at his watch, and finding the hour favorable he walked rapidly in the direction of the Cafè Gasnauet, which is near the theatre at Ralliement Place. He was almost certain of finding Raoul Bertholon there at that time of day, alone, or with a friend. The young architect was there in fact, alone, and apparently greatly bored.

When he saw the doctor, he looked as if he wished to sink through the floor; he returned his bow with an air of indifference and began to read his newspaper, hoping that M. Rozel would pass by on the other side.

Vain hope! The doctor came and sat beside him on the large divan, where the great space between the tables permitted the different groups of people to be entirely isolated from each other.

"It is beautiful here," said M. Rozel, admiring, with the air of a connoisseur, the really artistic decorations of the place. "You come here frequently, do you not?"

"Yes," responded Raoul indifferently, "it is quiet here; no noise of any kind."

As most of the conversations were carried on in an undertone, the regular noise of the billiard balls in a neighboring saloon was the only thing to remind one at this hour of the afternoon that it was a public place.

"It is wonderfully quiet," replied the doctor, ordering a *vermout.*

When the beverage was before him he settled himself comfortably on the divan to enjoy it; he was a sybarite in his own way, and greatly liked his ease.

"You will leave soon for the sea coast, with Mme. Bertholon," he continued, with an air of innocence.

Raoul regarded him as if he had announced an anticipated visit to the Shah of Persia.

"Yes," the doctor continued calmly, "you will spend six weeks or two months there, for a rest."

The iron was cruel, knowing as he did that the handsome architect was idle most of his time; but one may rest very often when one is not fatigued, so it was not this that surprised M. Bertholon.

"Excuse me," said he, "but how do you know it?"

"Your mother informed me of it a few minutes ago. I made her a short visit and we spoke of various things—So your marriage is broken off?"

Raoul was ill at ease and moved about as restless on the soft cushions of the luxurious divan as if they were stuffed with thorns.

"Great Heavens!" he exclaimed, "it is broken off—yes, it is—in fact, I am desolate!—I swear to you that I am inconsolable—but after all that has passed, you must confess that the alliance was much less brilliant—and my honor—"

He was very much confused and the doctor came to his rescue.

"The alliance was less brilliant? do you mean the marriage of Charles? For Mademoiselle ———,

we will not name her here if you wish it, has changed in no way that I know."

"Oh! I assure you," said Raoul, with a certain warmth of manner, "she is just as she always was, that is, an angel! But—although—I realize this, to avoid complications which would be quite disagreeable, it is better—"

"So you have renounced her entirely, without hesitation?"

"Pardon me! not without hesitation, no indeed! It has been very painful to me—but—" Suddenly looking at his interlocutor he leaned toward him and said, as if seized with an irresistible effusiveness: "You do not know, doctor, what it is to oppose a woman like my mother. For eight days I have endeavored to withstand her, but with no success! She does not wish it, and I will be the most miserable of men if I resist her. No, there is no resource."

"Do you mean she would disinherit you?" asked the doctor in a mocking tone.

Raoul's eyes flashed angrily.

"If it were only that!" said he, "but it is the life she would lead me. Between two griefs I have chosen the one which—which was—"

"Was the lesser and the farthest from you," said M. Rozel, rising to leave. Then suddenly he added: "If you will come with me to the Nest, and if you had the courage to escape from the leading strings—excuse me, I cannot find a suitable expression—of your mother, even though she should disinherit you, it would not be a very great misfortune! My friend is rich enough to compensate—"

"Oh! it is not that!" protested Raoul, with real anger, and evident sincerity. "It is on account of my peace of mind. You see, doctor, should I marry against her wishes I should never know another happy moment, never, never!"

"Which would be very disagreeable!" said the doctor, nibbling the head of his cane. "You have decided then; you will not?"

"I cannot!" replied the young man, with an air of constraint.

"It is a pity!" replied M. Rozel, as coldly as if the words had fallen from the lips of Mme. Bertholon. He bowed and turned his back on Raoul who laid his hand on his shoulder to retain him.

"Tell her, doctor," whispered he, "that this affair has troubled me greatly—I assure you, you cannot imagine—"

"I shall not mention it to her, you may depend upon it," replied the doctor briefly, "if you wish her to know it, tell her yourself. Good-evening."

He took his departure, leaving Raoul greatly annoyed. After a moment of hesitation the young man sat down again, saying to himself: "No, I cannot; it would be a hell on earth. I regret it deeply, but it is impossible."

CHAPTER VIII.

Doctor Rozel hastened at once to see Aurette. As a diplomat, he was charmed at his success with Mme. Bertholon; as a friend, he regretted that he had not obtained anything more satisfactory from Raoul. So he resolved to keep silent in regard to his interview with the young man.

"Mlle. Leneil listened to her old friend with deep interest, which repaid him for his trouble, her beautiful brown eyes speaking her thanks more sweetly than her lips.

"You see," concluded the excellent man, "the *amour propre* is saved, which is a great deal; the heart—"

"Do not speak of that," said Aurette, "now or ever. However, there is one more question I will ask you, and I entreat you to answer it with perfect candor; after which all will be at an end, forever. Do you believe that in this affair M. Bertholon has been entirely in harmony with his mother, or has he allowed himself to be ruled by her? This point is to me of the greatest importance, for—"

She could not finish the sentence; her face was flushed, and her lips trembled.

"It requires all my moral courage to answer this question," replied the doctor, "but you know it is impossible for me to judge of anything so serious, all alone."

"I do not ask this of you," responded Aurette, "but have you seen or heard aught that would justify you in believing that Raoul Bertholon did, or did not share his mother's views in this matter?"

At this direct interrogation, M. Rozel felt constrained to respond candidly. So he told her of his conversation with the young man, without exaggeration or extenuation.

"You see," said he, as he ended his recital, "he is not a wicked young fellow; he is disinterested, which is something to his credit, but he is an egotist who prefers his own ease and pleasure to all else. Your life with him would be one continual sacrifice, and you would very quickly discover that he is not all you have believed him."

"Yes," said Aurette with infinite sweetness, "you are right; but we will not speak of it!"

She remained silent for some time, and the doctor gazed at her beautiful face as she reflected.

Never had she been so lovely; the anguish of the past days had given to her beauty an exalted character which rendered it noble and pathetic. Certain natures are crushed beneath a load of sorrow, others lift themselves up the better to bear them. Aurette seemed really to have grown, and this impression was so strong in the mind of M. Rozel, that he measured her with his eyes several times, involuntarily.

"You are goodness itself!" said she, after a long silence, "You have rescued me from a terrible situation; I will write the letter which you have promised to Mme. Bertholon, whenever vou desire it, and as you desire it—"

"There is time enough!" interrupted the doctor, "it is necessary that your father should be well enough for you to announce this change to him. What will you tell him?"

"Oh! do not fear, I have thought of it," said she with a sad smile. "I will tell him that I am wounded by the Bertholons' indifference to his illness, and that I prefer not to give him a son who does not sufficiently love and respect him."

The doctor looked at her with admiration. "This is perfect!" he exclaimed, "an old philosopher like

myself could not have done better! but as I said, we have plenty of time. On Sunday you must choose a favorable moment to announce to him Mme. Bertholon's departure."

She simply bowed her head in response, and he drew her to him and affectionately kissed her brow.

"Ah!" said he, as if speaking to himself, "to find a woman like you, and not know how to love her until death! What a sad idea of mankind this gives one! But life is long, and all men are not idiots."

M. Leneil took the announcement of Mme. Bertholon's little journey very philosophically. Far from dreaming of the broken engagement, and believing from his daughter's tranquil air that at the furthest it was only a passing coolness, he welcomed with a certain relief the thought of not seeing the old lady again for several weeks. He was always as amiable to her as possible, but the manners of Aurette's future mother-in-law were too cold and haughty to please him; but on account of the interest he had in Raoul, he had taken great pains to preserve his cordiality to a person with whom he really had very little sympathy.

"One doesn't marry one's mother-in-law," he said to console himself, "much less the mother-in-law of one's daughter."

Resolved to show herself satisfied with her brother's marriage, Julia returned to the convent to finish the last weeks of school. She and her sister had debated this important question for a long time; must she remain quietly under the paternal roof, or face the cruel and indiscreet gossip, and bravely risk hearing painful things? With one accord the young girls decided to hold up their heads in the world; to have retired would have given cause for even more disagreeable comments.

"They will think that we are afraid," said Julia, whose straightforward nature did not recoil from the struggle.

Thus Aurette found herself alone with her father, who had a natural tendency to fly to her as an asylum of tenderness and peace. The great empty house, and the staircase which was so seldom used now, resounded at the slightest noise! In vain did Aurette impose upon herself two hours of practicing her music each day, for when she closed the piano, the silence in this deserted mansion was

more profound than ever. M. Leneil never murmured; convalescent after a blow which had nearly wrecked his life, he enjoyed each passing hour and asked for nothing more. He thoughtfully avoided any allusion to their recent mortifications, hardly ever pronounced his son's name, never Sidonie's; and seemed to desire nothing in the intervals between his long slumbers, but his daughter's smile and a glimpse of the landscape, veiled in a mist, or flooded with sunlight, but always exquisite, at every moment of the day.

In this life, consecrated exclusively to her father, Aurette had not much time for thought. During the long hours which she spent near him, as he slept, she rigorously interdicted all sorrowful memories. What if M. Leneil should awake suddenly and see her tearful eyes and sad countenance? Too honest to be able to dissimulate, in even about a trifle, she could only bear the weight of her secret by separating it completely from her life, as if it did not exist. Later on, she would taste all the bitterness of a grief which had befallen her so unexpectedly.

Several days had passed away in this manner, when one evening she felt that this restraint had

become intolerable. Every thought which she had so long stifled seemed to be pressing on her brain so that it would burst.

M. Leneil was asleep, although it was hardly half-past nine. Aurette called a servant to take her place at his bedside, then throwing a lace scarf over her head, she descended to the park.

The night was warm, the sky cloudy, and the darkness profound; notwithstanding, after the first moment, it was light enough to find one's way in the shady walks. The young girl walked rapidly in the direction of a terrace some distance from the house, where the view was unobstructed from one end of the horizon to the other.

With her eyes lost in space she watched the western heavens which were still bright with the lingering hues of sunset. Far beyond the hills was the sea, whence the breeze bore to her the faint scent of the salt spray on its rocky coast. He was there, somewhere in the West; he, who after telling her that he loved her, had forsaken her.

Forsaken! yes. Like some poor, betrayed peasant girl, the rich Mlle. Leneil, in all the glory of her purity and her adorable virginity, was forsaken.

This word came to her lips like a wail, a knell. She had read in newspapers, accounts of girls abandoned by their lovers, and her heart had been moved with compassion for them; but had they not committed the one irredeemable fault which a man never forgives? In loving had they not forgotten their honor? They incur the scorn of the world, knowing that it has no pity, and that a lover despises her who trusts him even though he swears to love her forever.

But she! What had she done to merit the disdain of Raoul Bertholon, or that he should renounce her? She gazed more intently into the profound depths of the mute heavens, and her soul rushed toward the wave-beaten shores where one might lie down in the sands and wait to die.

To die! Oh! yes, to die, to flee from this unbearable agony where shame mingled with sorrow. To die, in order to forget, to be no longer capable of suffering. If in death we do not find forgetfulness of griefs, the promise of Paradise is but a cruel lie!

But Aurette could not die; as long as her father lived she must live. So she returned to her poor,

present self, so cruelly stricken and martyred, and bravely looked her woes in the face.

But how she loved him! How she had trusted and believed in him! Who would have dared to say that he did not possess every virtue and gift with which she had adorned him so prodigally? Who would have risked whispering in her ear that Raoul was a feeble egotist, spoiled by the world, enervated by the despotism of his mother to the extent of being oblivious of his duty as a man and a lover?

At this sorrowful hour she still did not wish to hold him responsible, so deeply had she loved him. She threw the blame wholly on Mme. Bertholon, closing her eyes to all evidence against him, so as to excuse and pity him.

Pity him! So be it. But what could she now do with her life, cut down in its flower, like a tree, too young, falling by mistake under the ax of the woodman? This wave of tenderness, of confidence, of hope, welled up in her heart as from the ruined basin of a fountain, whose waters overflow upon the sterile sand.

"How I loved him!" said she from time to time, without noticing that she was repeating the same

words, so cruelly did this multiple grief pierce every fibre of her soul.

She recalled with a kind of greediness the happy days of this lost love. They had danced together the past winter. He had sought her openly, standing beside her in the quadrilles, silent, but with a proud and contented air. She had dreamed of his loving her even then, and she had said to herself then should he demand her hand in marriage, she would not refuse him, provided her father would consent to it.

From that time she had voluntarily spoken of him to her father when they talked together, in order to accustom him to Raoul's name. She did not love him then, but he pleased her, and even Mme. Bertholon's frigid inflexibility appeared to her dignity graced with *savoir faire*.

And so one day her father had sought her in the conservatory, where she was busy with her flowers, and kissed her tenderly, so tenderly she could yet feel that kiss upon her brow, so deeply had it affected her. It seemed to her that for the first time it had dawned upon his mind that there was a possibility of her no longer being near him. For some

one had come to ask for her; oh! if it were only he! It was he!

With downcast eyes, and a generous blush suffusing her face, she had listened to M. Leneil present his arguments in favor of this false one! Poor, dear father! what a misfortune he had brought upon himself by thus pleading his cause! But it was to her a delicious pleasure to hear those respected lips express what she had been thinking for so many months. And when a little troubled by her long silence, he had asked her, not without a shade of inquietude, "What answer shall I give?" She had responded calmly: "If he pleases you, he pleases me." And from that day she had even loved the conservatory!

And so, *he* had come, with the frigid Mme. Bertholon, who was all smiles and good humor on this occasion. She could recall the slightest detail of this visit; the color of Raoul's gloves, the tie of his cravat, the gold locket which hung from his watch-chain, where, she said to herself, she would put her own picture, later on. She remembered the embarrassment of the young man, an embarrassment which instantly put her at her ease; and the betrothal kiss imprinted upon her hand, the first

lover's kiss which Aurette had ever received, and which gave her such a strange sensation that she had almost withdrawn her hand to offer her cheek instead, never thinking of wrong.

And since that time what a delicious existence! It was she who had requested to defer the marriage until Julia's return home, so that her father might not be left alone. How tenderly he had thanked her, her beloved father! At the memory of those words Aurette felt her heart melting and her eyes, although so dry and burning, were moistened with tears. Never could she forget what he said to her, this generous, unselfish father. He called her his treasure, his pearl, and she felt that such an affection would outlast all the hazards of life. But she did not dream at this time, that she would fly to it one day as the only asylum left to her on earth.

"Poor papa!" she murmured, resting her head upon the stone balustrade, while her heart was shaken with a storm of tears, "bless you for having loved me so fondly! And I will never leave you till you are in your tomb, when I will have folded your hands and closed your eyes for eternity."

This thought of a last separation, so cruel and perhaps so close at hand, far from depressing

Aurette, gave her new strength. Summoning up her courage she returned to her memories, deciding to revive once for all, the beautiful past, then to close the book, no longer to dream of it except as one dreams of the dead.

Yes, the time had been delicious. Every Sunday Raoul came with his mother and took away with him the bouquet which his fiancee had made for him; she believed, the innocent Aurette, that in these blossoms he read the sweet sentiments she had breathed upon them—but to him they were simply flowers, nothing more. They spoke little to each other, never in tete-a-tete, apart from the others; but at dinner he sat near her and she felt the edge of his plate touch her hand as she helped him to the daintiest morsels, glad to see him something of an epicure, and making a mental note of the dishes which he preferred, determined to banish from their future menus all those which did not win his approbation.

She could see now that she had lived in the future more than in the present, rejoicing threefold in actual pleasures because she believed that later on she would possess them always and without obstacles. Poor Aurette, unreasonable Aurette! she

had built her castles in the clouds, and a tempest had swept them all away!

And so short a time before this he had said: "I love you!" Mockery of fate, he had uttered these words almost at the moment when she lost him! How he had deceived himself, how he had deceived her! If he had loved her truly, loved her as she loved him, never could he have abandoned her.

And now all was over! this illumination of her life had vanished like the blaze of fireworks, leaving her in darkness after having blinded her with its dazzling lights. Aurette lifted her head and looked with tearful eyes across the gloomy landscape, where only black masses were defined against the horizon; thus would her existence be now, a dark impenetrable threshold, behind which she would conceal the ruins of her love.

One thing alone remained to her in this wreck, like the flag which floats above the mast of a foundered ship; he had never known how intensely she loved him, and he would never know.

She had often thought of the time, when, alone in their nuptial chamber. she would sit beside him and tell him of it. It was a dream which she had caressed with a peculiar joy and tenderness—this

avowal, prepared during so many months of silent adoration. In that solemn hour, before she laid aside her bridal wreath, she would pour out her love upon his soul like a perfume, and he should know all that she had felt, thought, hoped, before being to him—Poor dream!

Broken-hearted, drunken with tears, Aurette thought of her wedding dress, whose rich material lay carefully folded in a drawer; the soft silken stuff which she had chosen after so much consideration.

"It will be my shroud!" she said bitterly, "I will take it with me to my grave."

As in a vision she saw herself in the distant future, old, weary, bereft of her father; Julia married; Charles exiled forever, and she alone, all alone—and always in its drawer would be the bridal robe awaiting her for a shroud. And she would be neither a daughter, a wife, nor mother—nothing, only the wreck of a vanished past, of a decayed house—a being who has no object in existence—an old maid.

"This is not my fault," said Aurette, lifting her head, "and I will do my duty in spite of it all!"

She rose with an inexpressible lassitude; her feet staggered under her, her heart was bleeding, her head empty; she felt a vague desire to do nothing, to see nothing, to think nothing. It was necessary to return to the house, however, to take up the burden of life. Too weak to walk, she fell back on the terrace with her arms hanging by her side, and her eyes fixed on the dark horizon.

But gradually the sky grew brighter, a light breeze lifted the curtain of clouds and the stars appeared, forming themselves, in the purple depths of the firmament, into the same familiar groups which millions of our ancestors have contemplated before us.

"Ah!" exclaimed Aurette, "those stars—"

The cup of tears which she believed empty filled up anew, without her knowing from what mysterious source. These stars! She had gazed at them with so much confidence and love, the last time! Never could she look upon them again without a pang of suffering!

She threw herself upon the ground and wept bitterly, while the wind blew about the great tattered clouds which floated above her like gigantic birds in their silent flight. Then, by degrees, a melancholy

peace entered her heart, spreading over it with a sorrowful voluptuousness. These stars which filled her with an inexpressible anguish, over how many griefs as profound, as irremediable as her own, had they not burned, since the beginning of ages? All those who were dead, once burdened with woes, had in the end found repose; with their faces upturned to the skies, after their day was finished, they were sleeping in their last beds.

"I too," said Aurette, "will end my day and fall asleep. God grant that I may find eternal peace!"

Feeling stronger she arose, and with a firm step walked toward the Nest, where she could see the night lamp in her father's room shining feebly through the window.

"There, henceforth, is my star!" thought the young girl, and resigned, without being consoled, she entered the house.

CHAPTER IX.

A letter from Charles arrived at the Nest. As soon as he left France he had sent M. Leneil a letter on six closely written pages, telling him all that he had felt, rather than thought, which he had not been able to express to him.

He suffered, and always would suffer for having grieved his father, and above all, for having deceived him. All the consequences of his fault which he had not foreseen nor even suspected, appeared to him now, but one; the rupture of his sister's marriage had not yet come to his knowledge.

After reading this letter M. Leneil handed it to his daughter with a sigh. Aurette read it in silence, then folded it and returned it to the envelope. Poor Charles, he was already punished; what would he be when he learned what the premature accomplishment of his desires had cost his sister! For the moment, the young girl hesitated as to whether she should ever tell him; it seemed to her so hard to touch upon that anguish, that she longed to keep the dolorous secret to herself alone.

Notwithstanding, the thought that the whole of Angers would certainly know the substantial points in regard to her broken engagement, made her consider her duty in another direction. Charles would learn the facts from others, so would it not be unjust to herself to permit him to believe it a caprice of his sister, when really she was a victim of circumstances caused by his own fault?

After several days of meditation, Aurette resolved to end with one blow all which bound her to her lost happiness. M. Leneil was growing better each day, and the doctor permitted him to occupy himself, with moderation, with his business affairs, so she thought that the time was favorable to inform him of the change which had so unexpectedly taken place in her life.

The occasion was propitious; more than once already, M. Leneil had asked himself what he would do when she would no longer be there. In spite of the fact that Julia would return home in ten days, he felt how necessary to his happiness was his elder daughter. Prompt to reproach himself for what he considered an egotistical thought, he forced himself to speak of indifferent matters, but Aurette divined the restraint he put upon his feelings.

One morning just after breakfast, they were sitting in the park under a great plane-tree which threw its shadow over the grass like an immense parasol. Before them, the velvety green lawn stretched out in harmonious curves, on the edge of which behind a curtain of foliage they could see the house, girdled with wistaria. M. Leneil sat in an easy chair and his eyes roved, from time to time, beyond the surrounding shrubbery to the blue skies and over the sweet landscape, whose distant vista shone through an opening in the umbrageous walls. He loved this spot; the plane-tree, particular object of his care, was but a sapling when he purchased the Nest, and it was in the shade of this verdant parasol that his children had learned to walk. Now and then the gardener's rake brought to the surface the debris of metal playthings, souvenirs of that childhood already far away, and these findings always brought a tender smile to the lips of the devoted father.

M. Leneil slowly unfolded his paper and began to read; Aurette, who came from the house with her key basket, leaned over him and took it from his hand.

"'No," said her father, "give it to me."

"But, papa, I wish to read to you."

"I know it, but let me have it. I will read it myself. I must accustom myself to doing without you."

Although the heat was oppressive, Aurette shivered from head to foot; the hour had come; the inevitable words must be spoken. She sat down opposite her father, and in order to keep herself in countenance, took her work in her cold, trembling hands.

"Papa," she said slowly, without looking at him, "forgive me if I displease you, but if you will permit me, I will never leave you."

M. Leneil was not altogether surprised, for he had felt about him for some time an atmosphere of mystery.

"Is it your wish?" said he, hesitatingly, fearing that he was deceived, himself.

"I wish, papa, always to remain near you," replied Aurette, sticking her needle at hazard into the linen.

"You do not then desire to marry?"

With his hand upon the arm of her chair, he leaned toward her and scrutinized the charming face which was overspread with a transparent pallor.

Aurette laid aside her work which she could no longer hold in her trembling fingers, and drew her chair nearer her father, but a little behind him, so that he could not see her without turning his head.

"Papa," said she in a musical voice, attenuated designedly, "I do not wish to leave you. In these times of anguish I have found that you are dearer—nearer, and better loved than all the world. I have discovered that others do not love you as you deserve—and I have resolved to stay with you always."

Her voice died away entirely at the last sentence; she could not lie, and these words, without being an absolute falsehood, cost her a painful effort.

"You wish to renounce your marriage!" said M. Leneil, greatly agitated. "Have you reflected; have you taken in consideration?—"

"Papa," she said in a low voice, "I have been wounded, deeply wounded, by the conduct of Mme. Bertholon—and her son—on the subject of the marriage of Charles. I have found that neither of them are—what I believed them to be, and I would be unhappy all my life it—"

Her heart was too full, the tears flowed from her eyes and she hid her face in her hands; but only for a moment.

"I prefer you above all others, papa," she continued, "you are the beginning and end of my thoughts; I could not leave you unless I knew that I was giving you a son, instead of depriving you of a daughter. You will permit me, will you not, to write to Mme. Bertholon that I have changed my mind?"

M. Leneil remained agitated and perplexed; he looked by turns from the landscape to the house, seeking to collect the elements of a discussion upon this serious point. In his soul he knew that Aurette was right; Raoul could never have truly been his son. He liked the young man, but this liking stopped short of sympathy, and between himself and Mme. Bertholon, there had never been any congeniality. But he was concerned as to how it would appear to the eyes of the world.

"You should reflect well, Aurette, before you break off a marriage which is so near at hand. You should have discovered sooner the things which offend you at present! After your brother's unfortunate marriage, a rupture like this will put the finishing touch to the prejudice already awakened against the family."

Aurette's heart failed her. She must endeavor to defend herself cautiously, to offer a good excuse for doing it; and then perhaps be scolded for her obstinacy.

She had not foreseen so many complications; she had thought that to say to her father; "I will remain with you!" would be to win a tender kiss for herself, and that afterward her wounded heart would be restored to peace and silence. She felt powerless to sustain a new struggle.

"I entreat you, papa," she said, putting her arms around his neck, "not to insist upon it! You will make me so miserable. I know all you would say to me, for I have said it all to myself, and yet my resolution is unchanged. Make it easy for me, dear papa, I implore you!"

He unwound her arms from his neck and, taking her hand within his own, he looked at her attentively.

"Do you love someone else?" he asked with some inquietude.

Aurette could control herself no longer. A bitter, nervous laugh shook her whole form, while the tears ran down her pale cheeks. She felt her strength and will forsaking her, and it seemed to

her that if she did not recover herself immediately, she would lose all power over her mind and body.

Resisting this emotion with a superhuman effort, she quickly wiped the tears from her cheeks, and, though still trembling with excitement, she said to M. Leneil:

"Forgive me, papa, but it is so funny, the idea of my loving anyone else; at least it sounds droll to me! No, I assure you this is not my reason."

"Why, then?" said her father, with a serious, almost severe, manner.

"Because they do not love us!" she said with as much violence as her gentle nature was capable of showing. "Because they know that we are unhappy on account of my brother's marriage, and they have not written or spoken a word of sympathy for us; because they left without seeing us!"

"Very well," said M. Leneil, pressing her hand to stop her, "you are right. What you say is true; having been ill I have not allowed my mind to dwell upon their conduct until now. I will write Mme. Bertholon whatever you desire—"

Aurette interrupted him quickly.

'Please permit me to write, papa; in revoking your promise you might offend them, while I—well it

might be easier for me. If you will let me write, I will show you the letter before sending it."

M. Leneil bowed his head in assent, and Aurette rose to go, but he detained her.

"Once more, my child, think of the world, think of the future, and of all they can say and do—"

"I have thought of it! it is decided!" responded she, escaping from him.

When she was hidden from him by two or three turns of the shady walk, she stopped and clasped her hands in an agony of despair.

"Oh my God!" said she, "to have lied, to have lied for that! And to suffer thus without meriting it! What must the torments of the wicked be! Is it possible that one can suffer such anguish and live?"

She walked to the house slowly, for her knees almost refused to support her, ascending the staircase as if bowed beneath a heavy burden. When she reached her room she sat down before her desk and took out the letter which was already written. She read it over two or three times, assuring herself that all was as she wished it, then she bathed her face in cool water and returned to her father.

She saw him from afar, leaning back in his arm chair, with his eyes fixed on the skies of which he had a glimpse through the interstices of the foliage. He had an air of happy repose, but as Aurette drew nearer she could see the expression of his eyes and countenance more distinctly, and she understood better that he shared her resentment. Without speaking, she handed him the open letter which he read in silence:

"DEAR MADAM: My father has just passed through a very painful crisis which has made us very solicitous about his present and future health. Under the circumstances, I feel that my absolute duty is to devote, unreservedly, my entire time to him, until we no longer have any cause for fear. I cannot, consequently, fulfill the engagement which my father made with you in reference to my marriage with your son, and I beg you to release me from it. I hope that the motive which prompts me will render you indulgent to me, and I pray you to forgive me. Your sincere friend,

AURETTE LENEIL."

"It is too cold and formal," said M. Leneil, handing the letter to his daughter.

"I assure you, papa, that they deserve nothing better."

"You will break off with them, abruptly! and all their friends."

Aurette bowed her head.

"It is necessary, papa!" she said insistently, "You do not wish to make me wretched? Think how long I have weighed this; since the marriage of my brother! Make no objections, I implore you!"

"Do as you like," said M. Leneil, slowly. "I believe that you know your own heart, my child. I have confidence in you, although this is not all quite clear to me. I shall understand it later on, no doubt."

"Have you confidence in the doctor, papa?" demanded Aurette with a sudden animation. "Well ask him if I am not right! I am sure that he will say that I could not have done otherwise."

Her father looked at her still with a troubled air, but in the depths of her truthful eyes he read so much sincerity and candid assurance that he felt his soul revive.

"Kiss me," he said, "I believe in you; I believe all that you have said and will say, for you are truth itself."

She stooped and kissed him.

"And now," said she in a low voice, "we will never, never be separated."

He drew to his poor heart, sick and palpitating, that young head as her lips vowed an eternal renunciation, and in his weakness and lassitude, he blessed her for her tender devotion.

In the evening when M. Leneil was asleep, she wrote to Charles and told him the whole truth, with no extenuation or exaggeration.

"You must know all," she wrote him, "in order to justify me in the future if I am accused of acting rashly. To spare my father a terrible humiliation, I have endured, evaded, deceived and lied. This has cost me even more than to renounce a life to which I had looked forward with so much joy. I do not wish you to think me cruel, dear Charles, and I do not reproach you, but it is necessary for you to know the extent of my sufferings. I loved my betrothed as deeply as you love your wife, and now I no longer love or esteem him. I have taken upon myself all the blame and responsibility; I cannot do more, and in acting thus, remember, I have had two motives. The first and more powerful, was to spare our father; the second was to spare

you, in his eyes. If he ever knows that my marriage was broken off entirely on account of your own, he would never forgive you; while now I hope with time to lead him to wish for your return some day."

At this thought Aurette stopped to reflect. Was it possible that their family could ever be reunited at the Nest? That Charles forgiven and Sidonie changed, purified by time and trials, would once more make a part of the group around their father who would be restored and rejuvenated by the love and happiness of his children?

She alone, then, must bear the weight of another's fault.

An intense bitterness awakened within her, increasing momentarily. She had a desire to revolt, to cry out for justice. A thousand cruel words rushed to her lips, a thousand tumultuous emotions seethed in her heart; she seized her pen to write down the cruel truth which she could no longer suppress, the legitimate lamentations which were stifling her.

She rose and walked to the window which opened wide to the dark heavens. The pure, fresh night wind enveloped her suddenly as with wings; like

the tiny drops of condensed vapor upon cold and polished marble, the hurtful thoughts slipped from her soul and vanished.

"No!" she cried with profound melancholy. "How can the sufferings of others alleviate my own! Is not Charles already punished enough? I must not be wicked. It is cruel and unjust that I should suffer, but if I am selfish and wicked, I will merit it."

"O my God!" she continued, bowing her head, "at least permit me to die without having caused a pang of grief or suffering."

She closed the window and returned to her desk. With two or three affectionate words, she finished the letter and sealed it. She had fought her battle and won it.

CHAPTER X.

Between his two daughters, for Julia had come back to the Nest, M. Leneil was better and more promptly re-established than one could have hoped. This was the time most dreaded by Aurette and M. Rozel, when the town would be filling up gradually at the approach of winter, and the visits and meetings could not fail to bring upon the family many questions and comments.

The doctor had built around his friend a rampart of defenses so strong, that it was necessary to be very brave or mischievous to attempt to break through them. Besides, the men were much less agitated than their wives over the escapade of Charles; and as to Aurette's broken engagement, it was not regarded as anything very remarkable, Raoul having always been severely censured for his indifference. Moreover, the great failure of a prominent banker in a neighboring town, which seriously involved a number of the citizens of Angers, having drawn attention, by contrast, to the perfectly honorable and trustworthy transactions of the house of

Leneil & Co., M. Leneil found himself overwhelmed with marks of esteem, which touched him deeply.

There was not much happiness for Aurette. Her lady friends, either from curiosity or interest, more than once made her suffer torture. No one dared to question her in regard to Sidonie, but the least allusion to the sad past, even though discreetly evoked, and accompanied by expressions of sympathy and compassion, revived anew the memories of those terrible experiences.

On the other hand, she had received nothing but congratulations on the breaking off of her marriage, and Raoul Bertholon and his mother, whose haughty manners had made her unpopular, were severely criticized on all sides. Most of the speeches in reference to it would end in these words:

"Well, my dear, it is a happy thing that your eyes were opened in time, for poor M. Bertholon is so indolent that he will never make anything of himself."

Mlle. Leneil listened in silence, bowing her head in thanks, and speaking of other things; but Julia, who nearly always accompanied her, could see how pale and weary her sister looked on their return from these visits.

In the Bertholon clan, however, they took matters very resignedly. Raoul's mother, enchanted at having obtained her son's freedom, had refrained from speaking badly of Aurette. She had, on the contrary, exalted the virtues of that charming girl who had resolved to consecrate herself to her father, in order to soften his grief caused by the unpardonable conduct of his son and his adopted daughter. The absent ones had to bear all the burden of virtuous indignation of this excellent mother, who had no pity for them.

Mme. Bertholon had good reason for her charity to Aurette. She had acted in such haste, to profit, as she confessed to herself, by a large inheritance which had been unexpectedly bequeathed to a young orphan, a distant relative, who hitherto had been of no importance, but who would now be a brilliant match. Aurette's dowry could not compare with this, and Mme. Bertholon had determined that her son should be the happy possessor of this fortune.

Raoul, however, remained melancholy, and showed no eagerness to gather the fruit of the maternal schemes. Laughed at by his friends unceasingly, he had had with his mother more than one quarrel.

"I should have rejected your advice," he declared to her very sharply. "I should have disowned your conduct and married Mlle. Leneil; I will regret, my whole life, having so foolishly obeyed you."

But regrets were henceforth useless. He frequently met Aurette in company, into which M. Leneil now accompanied his two daughters; she responded to his respectful salute with a cold, correct bow, which put between them the breadth and depth of an abyss. He felt that she no longer esteemed him, although he had never heard her pronounce his name with indifference, and this thought tormented the young man more than he would have believed it possible in other times. Besides, he had never dreamed that he could be so embarrassed by a look from Julia.

Julia had been presented in society by her father, although she was scarcely seventeen years old: M. Leneil thought that after the unpleasant events of the preceding summer, they could not do better than to go out a great deal, and show themselves indifferent to idle gossip. He also believed that it was necessary for him to make every effort to turn his younger daughter from a vocation, the thought of which had greatly depressed him.

Although so young, she had manifested an ardent desire to devote herself to the care of the sick; an excessive religious excitement had afterward inspired the idea of entering upon a monastic life, and in spite of the opposition—perhaps even on account of the opposition which this plan encountered in her home, she was still so strongly attached to it as to give them great anxiety.

Since the unfortunate occurrence which had banished her brother from the paternal fireside, she had never made the least allusion to her future; seeing that her father wished her to share the social pleasures of her sister, she offered no resistance, and yet neither Aurette nor her father had dared to interrogate her on the subject. She followed them obediently and seemed to enjoy what passed around her.

One evening, the Leneil family dined in a numerous and brilliant company at the house of Doctor Rozel, who was celebrating an event in his household. Being left a widower early in life, he had taken to live with him a widowed sister, without fortune, whose son, brought up under his care, had been absent at Paris finishing his course at a hospital. The young man had been recalled by his

uncle, who had so much confidence in him that he contemplated resigning to him his practice.

"Why should he not become a professor in our faculty?" said the good man, "it would be infinitely better than to remain in Paris, and be lost in the crowd."

It was to celebrate the return of this new young doctor that M. Rozel had assembled his friends; it was also to assure himself that the handsome face and frank manners of Armand Deblay would win all of their sympathies.

Encountering Julia's violet eyes fixed upon him with a certain insistence, the good old physician went and sat beside her, settling himself as comfortably as possible according to his habit.

"You wish to speak to me?" said he, after assuring himself that their tete-a-tete would not be interrupted.

"I wish a great many things of you; but since you have your nephew, you no longer care for any one."

"You are mistaken," replied M. Rozel, calmly, "besides, what more is necessary? We now have two doctors instead of one to care for the same patients."

Julia flashed upon him a mocking smile in which he saw the gleam of barbed arrows.

"Oh! yes! I know," continued he, "Moliere has still left you a few satires to address to us. Perhaps you desire to be a doctor yourself!"

"Ah! but that would not be altogether disagreeable! However, there is time enough for that. But it is not of this that I wish to speak to you, doctor."

"I see what it is," he replied maliciously, for he recalled, how only a few months previous, compliments had had the gift of pleasing her. "You wish me to express my sentiments in regard to your charming appearance. Well, my dear girl, your dress is beautiful, and I beg to inform you that I am not ignorant of the fact!"

"It is true, my dress is beautiful. But were you going to say that it became me? I hope so, really."

"That goes without saying!" said the doctor, laughing.

"I hate ambiguity," said the young girl, sententiously.

"I perceive that you do. So, you perhaps will consent to spare me a preamble, and will give me a candid answer to a question I am going to ask you."

"What is it?"

"Do you still wish to enter a convent?"

Julia's countenance grew more serious, and M. Rozel feared that he had wounded her; but she lifted her eyes almost immediately, and looking him in the face said:

"No. Circumstances have made it impossible."

As he did not reply, she continued; "I have reflected; my dear ones are suffering, and will suffer more; papa does not need me, Aurette suffices him, but—"

"Aurette will marry," concluded the doctor.

"It is not that; Aurette will not marry—"

"Oh! if after awhile—"

"You do not know my sister," repeated Julia with the *aplomb* of youth, which is so droll when it is not impertinent, "she will not marry, you may be sure."

"So after all you might go into a convent!" said the doctor, beginning to be amused.

"No, for it is not my father who needs me, but my sister."

"Ah!" said M. Rozel, more seriously.

"If Aurette is left alone with papa, the restraint will kill her," said the young girl.

"The restraint?"

"You are a fine doctor not to know it! Have you felt my sister's pulse since—well, you know since when? No? Well then you have not discovered it. If she could not be entirely alone from time to time, out of the house to—well, it matters not what—she would die in a year or two—"

"Oh! she will soon forget it," replied the doctor not wishing to attach any importance to the prediction.

Julia looked at him with severity.

"She will not forget it, and she will suffocate. Look at her now while she is talking."

"She is wonderfully beautiful," said M. Rozel turning his head toward the corner of the drawing-room where Aurette was conversing with several of her friends.

"Granted; yet she is very thin."

"So she is."

"Without a doubt; and she has fever every day or two."

"Sulphate of quinine," suggested the doctor, concealing his uneasiness under a professional air, "and you must make her take it."

"Certainly, and this is why it is necessary for me to remain at home."

"And you could not do better," concluded the good man, pressing her hand affectionately. "But really, Julia, do you believe that your sister is suffering? She loved him then so well, this—ah! well!"

Julia gave him one of those straight glances which impresses one like a blow.

"She loved him—yes, she loved him. She loves him yet. Can you comprehend it?"

The doctor could not refrain from laughing.

"Pardon me," said he, "I am not a young girl and I cannot answer you satisfactorily."

"Please do not jest!" said Julia with a shade of indignation in her voice. "But can you understand how one can love a robber, a coward, a man who has conducted himself like this one?"

The doctor placed upon the young girl's arm, the large hand of a practitioner, so light and delicate in spite of its heavy appearance.

"When one loves—you will understand this one of these days, my little girl—one loves without reason, immoderately; one recovers from this malady, but the convalescence is long and subject to relapses

—You are right; remain with your sister, watch over her until the time when you yourself will—"

"I?" exclaimed Julia indignantly, "I? Oh! the idea!"

M. Rozel rose from his chair and was gone before the young girl could finish her sentence.

He wished that he had observed Aurette more closely; in fact, as he approached her he saw traces of suffering upon her delicate face; her cheeks were too brilliantly red, and her lips too pallid.

Profiting by a moment when a group was separating, he joined her.

"You are not well, my child," said he gently, "you look weary; you have overworked yourself, and must have a rest."

"I am not suffering," responded Aurette, blushing as if discovered in a fault.

"It matters not; you are impairing your health. Is that of no consequence?"

Aurette turned her beautiful eyes upon the doctor with a glance as direct, but not as abrupt as that of her sister.

"Yes," she replied after an imperceptible hesitation, "for papa needs me; I must be brave and keep my health."

"Very well! then I will come to see you tomorrow, and you must obey me implicitly. Besides I will put you in Julia's hands."

"I will be well cared for then," replied Aurette with a note of gayety in her voice, "if you only knew what a terrible person she is!"

"I have just discovered to my sorrow," responded M. Rozel," I really thought she would annihilate me. But you will be well in ten days, my dear child, and you can then be as useful as you wish to others, and to yourself later on—"

"She thanked him with a look which was not sad, but indifferent.

"Oh! I!" said she, with a slight gesture which revealed a renunciation so profound, that the doctor was really pained.

She smiled, and turning to her old friend, she changed the conversation.

"The visit which M. Rozel made to the Nest on the following day was not at all reassuring. For several months, deceived by Aurette's appearance, he believed her, if not gay, at least calm. She never alluded to the past, and with the tendency to believe that everything is going on for the best, which

grows upon one, the older one is, he thought she was peacefully resigned to her lot.

He discovered now that beneath this placid amiability his young friend was hiding her terrible agony. Not that her health was seriously impaired, for at her age a wholesome, well-balanced nature may suffer much and long without it producing grave troubles in the organism, but it was Aurette's mind that was ill, as the doctor found out after a short conversation with her.

Aurette's character had developed early; having the entire charge of the household at an age when young girls usually dream of pleasure, she had accustomed herself to watch over the welfare of others, before occupying herself with personal enjoyments. It was this almost unconscious abnegation which had given so much force to her love; instead of demanding it for herself, she had bestowed upon her lover all that was best and most noble within her.

The ingratitude of Raoul Bertholon had pierced her soul, and if the word *wound* was applicable to a purely moral state, one might say that a wound had been deeply engraven upon it. Aurette was like a being deprived of one of her members, and

who still feels the pain in the amputated limb. Her love was buried from her sight, but the place where it had been was bleeding and uncicatrized.

As it always happens in catastrophes which momentarily arrest the current of life, Aurette's sensibility had received a deep injury, and, if from force of habit, she still occupied herself with others, she had lost the spirit of activity which had characterized her formerly. Not only did she feel no inclination to employ her strength and time as in the past, but she found a kind of listless enjoyment in watching the days glide by without result or profit. The indolence and torpor which succeeded the first violence of her grief, made her, who was once so good and generous, almost selfish, and indifferent to the suffering of others. The conflict she had sustained, the restraint which she had imposed upon herself had changed her so that she would not have recognized herself, had she been capable of judging.

This was more dangerous than a physical malady. and the doctor was seriously concerned. A confidential talk with Julia disclosed more than he had ascertained himself, and he was really alarmed.

"Papa does not perceive it," concluded the young girl, "but Aurette is becoming an old maid,

and I would not be astonished should she end by living alone with a cat and a parrot, like the rest of them."

"Tut, tut!" said the doctor, "one's whole nature is not metamorphosed in six months, and Aurette is made of pure gold; your father has said this a hundred times, and he is right. It is time for reaction though."

"React then!" said Julia, sagely. "It makes me forget my grammar. I have tried everything in which she used to be interested. She no longer cares for the poor; she gives them money, but she doesn't want to see them or hear anything about them. And she never speaks of what she is thinking; there are moments when I imagine she no longer loves me."

"That will return, that will return!" repeated the doctor, consolingly; but in his heart he was not reassured.

Charles wrote regularly; he was comfortably established at Bombay, and his affairs prospering. He gave his father graphic descriptions of his life and surroundings, mentioning his wife, without having anything special to say about her. Sidonie had wished it so. She never sent a personal message to

any member of the family, and Julia, who took this conduct deeply to heart, was indignant at her indifference to Aurette.

"I do not understand," said she to her sister one day, "why you are not more hurt at her ingratitude, you were so kind, so kind, to her—"

Aurette, who was preparing a cup of tea for M. Leneil, placed upon the table a little china tea-pot.

"If our house should burn and all our possessions be destroyed, should we be much concerned at the loss of this?" said she, pointing to the fragile thing.

Julia gazed at her sister with astonished eyes, but Aurette busied herself with the teapot, and did not seem to wish to continue the conversation. But her sister was tenacious, and after a moment, returned to the attack.

"Does Charles know all the consequences of his beautiful folly?" she asked in a low voice, for their father was in the adjoining apartment.

"He does," responded Aurette, briefly.

"What has he written you?"

"That he would give his life rather than it should have happened. Ah! my God! it is very easy to offer his life when no one demands it of him! It is

much easier than to begin it again, when one no longer wishes it."

"Aurette!" exclaimed Julia in a voice stifled with tears, rushing to her and clutching her by the arm, as if she were standing on the brink of a precipice.

Mlle. Leneil, surprised at first, yielded herself to her sister's embrace, and passing her hand affectionately over her golden curls, said sweetly:

"This is foolish, dear, calm yourself."

M. Leneil entered the room and Aurette hastened to prepare his arm-chair, then offering him the tea, warm, and sweetened to his taste, she sat beside him to read to him, without betraying the least emotion.

"She frightened me!" said Julia to M. Rozel, in recounting to him this incident, three or four days later.

"It is important that she should take a great deal of exercise," replied the doctor. "I am going to give her a large dog, and insist upon her taking long walks with him alone. This will perhaps prevent her from becoming misanthropical; there is nothing like the society of a dog for reconciling one to mankind, says a philosopher."

This panacea, however, was unsuccessful, at least as to the moral. Aurette accepted the great Saint Bernard which he brought her, and obeyed his orders to take interminable walks in the neighborhood of the Nest, but she still preserved her cold tranquillity, broken now and then by a bitter word, concealed under the form of renunciation.

Julia wrote Charles ten pages of reproaches, and received in response six pages of excuses, in which he accused himself with bitter remorse, but this did not alter the situation. M. Leneil began to perceive the change in his daughter, and was greatly depressed by it; Julia trembled lest he should fall ill.

Their lives drifted onward in this manner for many months, bringing the succession of the seasons without disturbing the apparent peace of a household, in which each one concealed from the other, a sorrow or a secret inquietude.

CHAPTER XI.

One day in December, the following winter, M. Leneil returned to the Nest a little late for dinner; an unwonted animation gave to his eyes a brilliancy, and a fresh color to his usually pale cheeks. He seated himself at the table with an air at once contented and abstracted, and all during the repast he showed signs of preoccupation by which Julia profited to make him laugh.

The past year had singularly ripened the young girl. From her habit of ministering to the wants of her father and sister, she had acquired an unconsciousness of self, which alone can give perfect ease of speech and action. Her features, formerly somewhat angular, had rounded exquisitely and were in perfect harmony with her graceful movements.

By a strange reversion of things, there were moments when she seemed the "little mother" to Aurette, who often mechanically turned to her younger sister for the solution of some difficulty.

When dinner was over they repaired to the drawing-room, and M. Leneil looked at his two

daughters, one after the other, with an amused expression and finally said:

"A strange thing happened to-day: I have received an offer of marriage for each of you."

"Ah!" said Julia briefly.

She hermetrically sealed her lips and looked at her sister.

Aurette was silent, but a vivid blush suddenly suffused her face and neck. It had been a long time since the blood had thus mounted to her delicate cheeks.

"Yes," replied M. Leneil, "for both of you, and I must confess, my dear children, that outside of all other considerations, this double proposition has given me deep satisfaction, for the two suitors belong to the best part of the best society of Angers."

"Ah!" repeated Julia with the same abruptness, and without taking her eyes from her sister.

M. Leneil named the two men; a fresh wave of crimson dyed Aurette's cheeks. Julia contented herself with shaking her head with a knowing air.

"We have evidently risen in importance," said she with undisturbed serenity, "and now, papa, will you, if you please, explain to us which one is for

Aurette and which for me? Unless you do we can hardly express our real sentiments."

To their great astonishment, Aurette began to laugh, a real, young, merry laugh, the like of which they had not heard since the marriage of Charles. Julia looked at her almost in alarm, so improbable did this gayety seem. Her sister reassured her with a mischievous glance, which was so unforeseen in those sad, calm eyes.

"Julia is right, papa," said she, "for if you do not, we might both agree upon the same young man."

In their turn M. Leneil and his younger daughter laughed heartily. These joyous sounds resounded through the drawing-room in soft chords which vibrated musically, and Bruno, who was roaming on the terrace, came and pressed his nose against the window with a whine of entreaty.

M. Leneil—a thing which he had never done before—opened the window for the good dog, who, a little embarrassed at this unwonted privilege, bounded in and crouched at the feet of his mistress.

"Bruno in the drawing-room!" exclaimed Julia, "this is surely a merry day. Profit by it, old fellow, for as soon as we have recovered our senses, papa

will conduct you to the stable. But, papa, come, explain yourself; is M. Vernois for me and M. Daubray for Aurette, or the contrary?"

"You know well enough it is the contrary, you little actress," replied M. Leneil, smiling. "Well, Aurette, what say you?"

Aurette's countenance had already lost its animation, and after a moment's hesitation she answered gravely:

"I am very grateful, papa, and greatly flattered. You understand why, I think—But I do not wish to marry. I will never marry."

Julia and her father exchanged glances, involuntarily.

"Never is a very strong word, my child," said M. Leneil, "I hope you will change your mind; and if you will permit me to express my opinion, you will not often find so desirable a match as this one is in every respect; family, position, fortune, age, and personal merit—all united—"

Aurette had risen with a movement of nervous embarrassment; resting her hands upon the little table which separated her from her father, she spoke to him without turning away her brown eyes which

had in them the same sweet tenderness of other days.

"I will not marry, papa," said she, "because I will not sell myself, for position or anything else, and because it will always be impossible for me to have a feeling of love for any man, whatever he may be. I have had sufficient time to reflect, eight months, and I am convinced of the firmness of my resolution, and nothing can change me."

She remained standing, but with averted eyes, compressed lips and an air of concentration which changed the ordinary expression of her beautiful face. M. Leneil looked at her so intently that Julia shuddered. What would happen if he should question Aurette, and she should permit herself to reveal the secret of her wounded heart, so carefully guarded up to this moment?

"Papa," said she pleasantly, "leave Aurette to her whims, and interrogate me, please! Have I not also a right to be consulted a little in this matter? I am eighteen, you know, papa, and marriageable."

With an effort, M. Leneil bestowed his attention on his younger daughter.

"You are right," said he, still with an abstracted manner, "does your suitor please you?"

"If I were to tell you that he pleased me, you would be greatly astonished, papa, for you have not counted upon my leaving you."

"However," said he, determined to accomplish his paternal task conscientiously, "I would advise—"

"Yes, I know," interrupted Julia. "Do not weary yourself discussing it, papa; you are right, and I know beforehand much of what you would prudently and sensibly advise; but—I am not like Aurette—I intend to marry; only, not yet."

"My dear girls," said M. Leneil, "you have placed me in a very embarrassing position."

"Not I," said Julia, "for is it not evident that I am much too young. Look at these thin arms and this undeveloped figure! Wait till I have acquired enough *embonpoint* to do honor to your house. It is Aurette who has embarrassed you; she has not the same excuses as I."

"Papa," said Aurette, who was once more complete mistress of herself, "say to M. Vernois that I am inexpressibly grateful for the honor he has done me; tell him also, that had I wished to marry I would have chosen him in preference to all others, for he is a brave man, and as good as he is brave

and intelligent; but I will remain unmarried—an old maid."

She leaned over her father and embraced him tenderly, then left the room in order to cut short the discussion. M. Leneil and Julia remained alone, looking at each other in silence. Bruno, waking from his nap, after looking about him with astonished eyes, rose and put his nose under the crack of the door. Julia opened the door for him and he ran to join his mistress.

"Papa, do not torment Aurette; she has decided—"

"But why?" said M. Leneil, "I have never even understood why she broke off with the Bertholons. What happened? Anything which I do not know?"

Although inwardly agitated, Julia forced herself to pacify her father, at least for the present. His *amour-propre* had been more flattered by these two proposals than he could have believed possible. The mortification caused by his son's marriage and the gossip concerning it, had been very distressing to him; in spite of the extenuating circumstances, he felt how much the event had been discussed and censured. A kind of morbid sensitiveness had made him, more than once, take to himself words and

allusions which were never intended for him. That men as distinguished as these should wish to become his sons-in-law, was to him an evidence that all prejudice had vanished, and from that moment he was more like his old self.

The same impression, though not apparent, had been produced upon Aurette's mind. Without changing her outward demeanor, she felt less embittered than heretofore; the honor of having been sought in marriage by so distinguished a man recompensed her for the mortifications of the past. Her self-love ceased to suffer and her spirits, so long bearing the burden of the offense, were once more free.

Great news had arrived from India; in a few weeks Sidonie would become a mother. M. Leneil displayed no emotion, when his daughter spoke to him of the expected event. Since the departure of the young couple, he had received many letters from his son without responding to them. Aurette took charge of the correspondence and gave Charles encouragement unceasingly.

She felt no resentment toward her brother, and scarcely any to Sidonie, whom she had had ample

time to know during her childhood. Far from sharing Julia's ill-will towards their sister-in-law,she felt for her a kind of pity which resembled indifference more than kindness. She could not be indulgent to a woman whose nature rendered her incapable of lofty sentiments, and she did not even bear her malice for having deceived her with affectionate words, at the very moment she was plotting an act which would have such cruel results.

"But," said Julia, who was pitiless on the subject of Sidonie, "she told you that if she were on the verge of some folly or rash act, she would think of you, and this would make her pause. She said it, or I have dreamed it."

"She said it, but what does that prove? That she did not think of me at the right moment! Oh no, she did not think of me!" repeated Aurette a little bitterly. And yet, after all, it is a matter of indifference to me!"

"Indifference! Aurette, you say that it is a matter of indifference to you? But papa, and I—and Charles—"

"You all are the family, a part of myself, but as for the rest—"

Nothing can express the apathy with which she pronounced this word.

"And our brother's child?" said Julia, determined even to risk reproaches in order to rouse her from this passive state.

"His child—poor little one—papa would have been so happy—"

A kind of tender compassion nearly overcame her, but she resisted it, and submitted calmly to her sister's loving kiss.

"You know," said she with a mixture of severity and gentleness which had become her ordinary manner, "that papa must see Charles one time or another; I am not speaking of Sidonie. If he could see the child, he might perhaps become attached to it. Poor papa! he had so much wished for grandchildren, and now—"

She sighed faintly and resumed the work which she had laid aside to converse with her sister.

Julia, however, was sure of her connivance, even though tacit, and in spite of the aversion with which Sidonie inspired her, she resolved, for the sake of the expected little one, to gain the heart of M. Leneil.

Her father's heart was more vulnerable than even he himself would have believed. In spite of the painful impressions which were awakened inevitably at the memory of the culprits, time had effected its work of reconciliation. From the almost indefinable shades of his changing moods, Julia soon learned to distinguish the times when she could venture to speak of Charles, from those when she must refrain from mentioning him. Aurette, solicited by a look of entreaty, would lend her aid to the conversation, and gradually they won his silent approbation to their speaking of the exile in his presence. Julia, who knew no such word as obstacle, one day risked herself upon dangerous ground.

"When Charles returns to Angers," she began.

Aurette, alarmed, looked quickly at her father who feigned not to be listening. The audacious girl completed her sentence, otherwise of no importance, and passed on to another subject.

This was a great point to have gained. After this day, she often talked, a little at a time, of his return as perfectly natural, and although he never appeared to hear her, M. Leneil followed the

conversation with an agitated attentiveness, which she did not fail to observe.

One Sunday, as they were walking slowly in the garden, while halting a moment under the great plane-tree, she saw her father's eyes fixed upon two windows on the second floor of the house. It was the old nursery of his children, where the three surviving ones and the two who had died early, had learned the beginnings of life. Julia slipped her arm into his, and pointing to the windows, said:

"The gratings must be replaced, you see, papa; the old ones are worn out."

"They had better be removed altogether," responded M. Leneil still gazing at the old nursery meditatively.

"You forget, papa, that they will have to be repaired for Charles' little one."

M. Leneil continued his walk without replying to her, and in a few moments they returned to the drawing-room; he settled himself comfortably in his arm-chair and took up a late review behind which he screened his face, but his daughter, who was watching him from the corner of her eye, saw there an expression of sweetness which had not

been upon his countenance for many months, and it seemed to her a happy omen.

An incident which no one could foresee or avoid, disturbed anew their hopes for the future.

On returning from Angers one day, M. Leneil made a sign to Julia, who from force of circumstances had become his confidant in a number of delicate matters. She followed him into his study, and he closed the door.

"Raoul Bertholon is to be married," said he mysteriously.

"He will marry his heiress, I suppose," said she disdainfully, "and his dear mamma ought to be contented!"

"How must we break it to Aurette?" continued her father; "Doctor Rozel has just told me of it; it is being discussed in town, and he is anxious that Aurette should not hear it there first."

"He might tell her himself. Suppose you invite him to dinner, with his perfection of a nephew; in the conversation after dinner we might more easily introduce the subject than when we three were alone."

"Very well," said M. Leneil, "I will invite them very soon."

"Don't forget the nephew, papa," said Julia, "that boy amuses me!"

"That boy" was nearly six feet tall, with a luxuriant chestnut beard, and brown eyes almost as beautiful as Aurette's; he seemed in fact to greatly amuse Julia, for they never failed to disagree upon a thousand points of detail, afterward to find themselves perfectly in accord upon the whole, and she had a way of looking at him scornfully, during their quarrels, which testified to her complete and malicious satisfaction.

At four o'clock that afternoon, when M. Leneil turned the corner of the quiet old street where Doctor Rozel lived, he found himself face to face with his notary.

"Well," exclaimed the notary, "congratulate yourself on having made a beautiful escape!"

"What do you mean?"

"Mme. Bertholon—" he stopped a moment to see that no one was listening.

"I know; she is about to marry her son off—You are not going to draw up the settlements, my friend?"

"Her son is about to marry, yes; but it is not that. She is also about to lose half of her fortune in the Bosnie mines."

"Ah!" replied M. Leneil, moderately interested and still less sympathetic, "This is unfortunate!"

"Permit me to contradict you, my dear sir; it is but just. Providence is punishing her for the infamous way in which she conducted herself toward you."

Following the principle of instantaneous crystallization, a thousand incoherent thoughts in the thousandth part of a second crowded into M. Leneil's mind, and he at once divined the secret which they had so carefully guarded from him. The shock was so violent that he was forced to make a great effort in order to keep from falling.

"In fact," said he, not without difficulty, "she did merit punishment."

"Her son is marrying a considerable fortune, however—he knows how to make himself fall in love, the happy architect—but his mother will not have much left, and I strongly doubt if the daughter-in-law will invite her to share her splendor—Good-evening, sir; my regards to the young ladies."

He turned the corner and was soon out of sight. M. Leneil took several steps, mechanically, and reaching the doctor's he seized the bell and pulled it with all his strength. A moment later he was in the consultation room upon a sofa, and his friend

was bending over him, bathing his forehead with camphor.

"What has happened to me?" said he, endeavoring to rise.

"A sudden dizziness," replied the doctor, "it is over now. What caused it?"

M. Leneil raised himself as best he could, though still somewhat faint.

"Doctor," said he, "it was Mme. Bertholon who broke off the marriage, and not my daughter."

"My faith!" exclaimed M. Rozel, "but since you have found it out, there is no necessity for deception. Yes, it was she."

"And my daughter, my poor Aurette—Ah! my friend, she is an angel!"

"Exactly—but compose yourself and sit down; we can talk of her just as well sitting."

M. Leneil obeyed, and after a long meditation he said:

"This is terrible; what she must have endured; and her courage saved me! At her age to bear such a burden. Did you know it, doctor?"

"Certainly, I took upon myself the responsibility of concealing from you this sad story."

"But how did it all happen?"

In a few words, M. Rozel recounted to him his participation in the matter. When he finished speaking, his friend grasped his hand.

"You have saved," said he, "not our honor, for that has been above reproach, but the dignity of our house, and in keeping me in ignorance of it, you have surely saved my life—Ah! if I had known of that letter! You know I am not wicked, doctor, but I would have been capable of murdering some one—the mother or the son—the miserable coward!'

"No," replied the doctor gently, "say rather, the poor devil!—He is not a villain, and I assure you that he will be punished, if he is not already. Think of it; from under the yoke of a despotic mother he falls, nearly penniless—note that, under that of a woman older than he, who is very rich, but whose education has not prepared her for her fortune; a woman without distinction, manners, accomplishments. I swear to you that, guilty as he is, I pity him. And he loves Aurette."

"Not enough!" exclaimed M. Leneil, brusquely. "And I fear that the announcement of this marriage will bring fresh sorrow to my daughter. Poor child! she is so changed! I did not understand it; believing her to be the author of the rupture, I

could not explain why she should have changed so greatly. I sometimes accused her of coldness. She hid her sufferings from me with an incredible fidelity. And will you believe me, doctor, when I tell you that she is full of kindness for her brother?"

"It does not surprise me," replied the doctor; "Aurette possesses the spirit of charity to a remarkable degree. Besides, we now know that Mme. Bertholon had already in view this heiress, whom she is forcing her son to marry, and Charles' escapade was only pretext."

"Speak no more of him!" cried M. Leneil. "It is he who has brought this shame and mortification upon our house. If he had only acted against my wishes, I would have found it hard to forgive him, but now that I know—To see my daughter repulsed by these Bertholons! In truth, it is more humiliating than for me to know that I have for a daughter-in-law the child of a bankrupt suicide. No, doctor, make no excuses for him!"

"After all," said the brave old doctor, "Charles is not so culpable as Sidonie; it was she—"

"Charles is a man, let him defend himself. Her I despise; but my son—speak of him no longer—it is useless."

After obtaining his promise to come with his nephew to dine next day at the Nest, M. Leneil took his leave, a prey to so many confused sentiments that he had lost all idea of time, and almost believed himself borne back to the epoch of the events which had so sadly changed the happy life of his little family.

On entering the Nest, and seeing Aurette coming to meet him, so different from the Aurette of other days, he plunged abruptly into realities. Overcome with emotion, he took her face between his hands and gazed into the depths of her beautiful eyes as if seeking to get a glimpse of the devoted soul which had suffered in silence for love of him.

Disquieted at first, Aurette endeavored to disengage herself, but seeing that her father's eyes were dim with tears, she suddenly comprehended that he knew her secret. A blush of wounded modesty mounted to her cheeks, and throwing herself upon his breast, she hid herself from the look which opened all her wounds.

He enfolded her in his fatherly embrace, as if to shelter her from all harm, and led her, or rather permitted her to lead him, to the drawing-room,

where she made him sit in his arm-chair. He still retained her hand.

"Aurette," said he in a low voice, "you have deceived me—My poor child! what love, what devotion!"

"Papa," said she, "to what are you alluding?"

"You know very well! What is most surprising to me is that I have not discovered it sooner. But you kept your secret well, you dear guardian angel!"

"Let us think of it no longer, papa, I am angry that any one should have disturbed your peace."

She spoke without agitation, with the tranquil coldness which she had acquired in the past year, and which contrasted so strangely with the affectionate warmth of her manners in other days. Her father suddenly realized this change, and it pierced his heart.

"My child, my dear child!" said he in a stifled voice, "they have broken your heart!"

The icy bands which were around the soul of Aurette burst asunder as if she had received a violent shock. She saw her father bowed down with grief for her, and the memory of his whole life of tenderness and generosity came to her with such vehemence that she could not resist it; tears flowed

from her eyes which had been so long dry, she threw herself into her father's arms like a wounded bird returning to its nest.

She wept bitterly for a long time in silence, upon the dear, paternal heart that was bleeding for her; he gently passed his hand over her hair, and from time to time kissed the pure forehead upon which grief had left its ineffaceable mark. At last she lifted her head and wiped her brown eyes, whose velvety softness seemed to have been born again with the tears, and said sadly:

"Poor papa, I had so much wished to spare you this!"

"And I, my child, regret deeply that I was not strong enough to have received the shock myself, to have softened its violence for you. You have been the true head of the house for nearly a year, while I have been incapable of protecting you."

The memory of his son's folly returned to him, and the expression on his face was more stern.

"Now," he continued, "I am in a proper state to defend my own, and I will defend them."

"No one dreams of disturbing us, papa," responded Aurette with a gentleness which recalled her old self.

"So be it; but it remains to me to stand between you and the sorrows—" He shuddered as he thought of Raoul's marriage, and of the necessity of announcing it to his daughter.

"I will have no more sorrows, papa," said she," I do not believe that it would be possible for me to be affected by anything, at least which does not concern you or Julia."

"M. Leneil looked at her with an air of doubt; she understood it and continued with some warmth:

"Nothing, papa, I assure you, and I know whereof I speak. I have emptied the cup to the dregs. I have known the humiliation which comes from without, and that which comes from one's self—I have been ashamed of myself for being grieved, after having blushed at seeing myself treated thus; I have repressed my tears that you might not see them; I have spent days and nights questioning myself how it could ever have happened, always as astonished as upon the first day, that a man could have so little heart and dignity. I began in sorrow and ended in indignation. And now that twenty months have passed over my grief, I can say to you truthfully that nothing can any longer astonish or touch me."

She was once more the haughty, indifferent Aurette of the past year.

"Do not speak in this manner, my child!" said M. Leneil, drawing her to him, "you alarm me!"

"What would you have me say, papa? My life is ruined in every way. I no longer love any one but you and Julia; I no longer believe in any one or pity any one, outside of those who are dear to me. It is not my fault. I would have it different. I am neither wicked nor hard hearted, but I cannot, no, I cannot any longer be affected by the sufferings of others. After what I have endured in silence, other people's sorrows appear to me as less than nothing—and then too others console themselves, while I—"

She turned away her beautiful face which was now as white as marble. Her father drew her to him.

"Did you then love him so?" he asked in a low voice.

"I loved him so! May God forgive me, papa, but I loved him foolishly. I loved him more than all but honor. I loved him more than you, since I would have left you to follow him. He was all in all to me! I adored him! I would have joyfully

been his slave. I would have loved him poor, infirm, repulsive. I have heard of women who were weaned from their husbands because they were afflicted with some horrible malady, and I have asked myself what I should do if such a thing should happen to him. I know that I would always have loved him until death, through every misery. I loved the place where he stood, the air which he breathed, and see—since he is gone, I never notice a flower, there are no more bouquets in the house. I loved the flowers only that I might give them to him, it seemed to me that my soul went out to him with their fragrance. All this is destroyed, nothing of my life remains but my duty and affection for you, papa."

M. Leneil put his hand over his eyes. He had never dreamed that the soul of this gentle, light-hearted girl contained such depths of tenderness; how had it ever given birth to this ardent passion? No one would ever know.

"I hope I have not grieved you," she said, "but I could restrain myself no longer; after so long a silence, I had to speak. Forgive me, papa, and believe me when I tell you that my only happiness is in you."

She stooped to kiss him. As feeble as he felt himself he knew that the moment had come for him to reveal the truth to her.

"You say that nothing can any longer grieve you," said he, "and yet should he marry—"

"I am prepared for that," she replied in a calm voice.

"Even if he made an advantageous marriage?"

"He could never make any other kind," said she coldly.

"I have learned—" M. Leneil still hesitated.

"That he is to be married?" said she. "To whom?"

"A distant cousin, very rich, but without education."

"Ah!" exclaimed Aurette. Then after a short silence she added: "This is as it should be. This marriage avenges me."

"Assuredly," cried her father, "and this will be the opinion of everybody. Besides, there is something else; Mme. Bertholon is nearly penniless."

Aurette lifted her head proudly.

"Really," she said, "that was not needed; I would be avenged without it."

Julia entered the room, a little uneasy at the prolonged conversation.

"Have you heard," said Aurette, with a certain sneering note in her voice which had become familiar to Julia, but which depressed M. Leneil who had never heard it before. "Have you heard that M. Bertholon is to be married, and his mother has lost her fortune? Great news for one day!"

She walked slowly toward the door, leaving her sister and father startled; upon the threshold she turned and said:

"If I had need of consolation this would console me, and if I were still suffering this would cure me."

She then left the room; her dog, who was waiting for her in the hall, came to lick her hand, but she passed on without noticing him and went up to her room. Five minutes later she descended the staircase perfect mistress of herself apparently.

Several times during dinner Bruno came to whine at the glass door which opened upon the terrace; the snow was falling in large flakes; a February snow, thick and resistant.

"Papa," said Julia compassionately, "let us open

the door for Bruno! See how cold it is out of doors."

"It is useless," said Aurette in her calm voice. "Dogs are made to be patient as men are to suffer."

"M. Leneil and Julia exchanged glances. In a few moments Bruno's fleece was entirely covered with snow, and the poor dog remained immovable before the glass which separated him from his mistress and the blazing fireside.

"Take Bruno to the kitchen," said M. Leneil to a servant, "and see that they give him his supper."

Aurette said nothing. That evening as she passed through the back hall, making her rounds as mistress of the house, she stumbled over Bruno who was stretched out at the foot of the steps. On seeing her, he lifted his head with a sad, submissive air. She put down her candle, and affectionately caressed his shaggy head.

"Poor old fellow," she murmured, "forgive me; if you only knew how I suffer!"

And stepping across the body of the grateful animal, she went immediately to her room.

CHAPTER XII.

By a word, M. Leneil had warned the doctor that he need not perform his delicate mission; the good man had arrived at the Nest in his most brilliant humor and his gayest spirits. During the repast, which was presided over by Aurette with an affability, a little forced, which had supplanted her graceful ease of former days, he teased Julia incessantly, provoking from her the most extraordinary responses, which more than once brought a smile to the lips of his nephew, Armand Deblay.

Even Aurette could not refrain from laughing at the droll manner in which her sister parried the doctor's attacks, and her laughter fell like sweet music upon her father's ears.

In spite of the grief which she had experienced the evening before, the young girl seemed in better spirits. Raoul's marriage, which would definitely close one period of her life, turned the current of her thoughts into a new channel, and as painful as was to her the necessity of despising him entirely,

she found therein a certain repose; the era of doubts and indecisions had disappeared forever. She felt a relief, yet there was much bitterness mixed with it; if she had expressed her sentiments in words, she would have said that she was now at liberty to despise Raoul Bertholon.

When the friends were assembled in the drawing-room after dinner, M. Rozel directed his attacks to Aurette.

"Why are there no longer any flowers nere?" he demanded. "I am accustomed to seeing this house full of them, and it was a charming custom. There are only green plants! I do not wish to slander the green plants, but I loved your bouquets and heavy baskets, my child."

"Aurette turned away her head and murmured an excuse which M. Rozel did not hear.

"How is the conservatory looking?" he continued imperturbably.

"Not badly, the gardener has it in charge," replied Mlle. Leneil.

"And you?'"

She turned upon him her beautiful brown eyes where burned a restless fire.

"I no longer love flowers," she said almost harshly.

"Tis a pity," responded the doctor calmly. And music?"

"Oh! music—one can always make some kind of music!"

"That is true. Well, give us a little of whatever kind you like."

Without waiting to be urged, Aurette went to the piano and played two pieces of a widely different character: one a prelude by Bach, the other a brilliant composition by Rubenstein. She had made, technically speaking, remarkable progress, but she had lost as much in delicacy of touch and depth of feeling as she had gained in the purity of her execution.

"I like her old method better," whispered M. Leneil into the ear of his old friend, who was seated near his arm-chair.

"Have patience!" responded the doctor in a low voice. "We must first effect a cure; —it will take a long time—but I hope we will succeed."

Aurette left the piano and rejoined them. While they talked she listened silently, thinking of her eternal grief, awakened every time she touched her

fingers to the piano keys. Suddenly her eyes wandered in the direction of the table, where, seated near each other, Armand and Julia were looking over some old photographs.

They were perfectly calm and were talking in an ordinary tone of voice, yet, before they knew it themselves, Aurette had a sudden, secret intuition that they loved each other.

"How old is Julia?" she said to herself. "Almost nineteen—it seems to me that she is still a child. My troubles have matured her early, however."

As she watched them her whole being rose in revolt. She wished to rise and cry out to her sister: "Love not, love not!" Then the immense cloud, black and opaque, which had covered her sky, was suddenly rent, and she was blinded with a golden light, intense and penetrating. Before her, others had loved; after her, others would love; what was she in the midst of this ocean of souls, all of which had been burned by that sacred flame?

While she loved was she not happy? Was this too much despair and anguish for one whole radiant year when she believed in love?

What did it matter if she had been deceived? What did it matter if she had lost the man she

loved? Love remained imperishable. And Aurette felt, with a great rapture in her soul, that she had deceived herself, that she had not loved Raoul, the unworthy, but that she had loved love.

She had crowned this commonplace creature with the halo, even with the sublimity of love; she had taken the idol for the god; the idol had fallen in the dust, but immortal love mourned above the ruins, upon a height where naught could reach it. Her whole heart, her will and strength soared upward in a sorrowful ecstacy to this adorable thing, this ideal apparition which would heal her wounds, and lift her up, like Pysche, to a glorious empyrean.

Like a tree stricken by a thunderbolt while in full blossom, which afterward yields incomparably savory fruits, she blessed the divine arrow that had pierced her heart at the supreme moment of her happiness; she had held it in her hands, this swift, indiscernable happiness; she had received a visit from that supernatural guest, which transfigures all it touches; as empty as her future life appeared to her, her past life was full of exquisitely sad things; things to make one smile and weep. Raoul was only the pretext, the now lifeless relic of a delicious dream; she could shed tears of intense regret over

her vanished dream, but she no longer felt the pang of a despised love, a love blighted by the weakness and wickedness of another; love had visited her soul, and love could never die.

While this splendid vision took form in her mind, Armand and Julia continued to chat in the rosy light of the great lamps.

The brown head of the young physician and the blonde one of her sister, were in the same aureole of soft, warm radiance.

A yearning tenderness, almost unknown to her now, awakened in her as she watched them, as in a kind of apotheosis. They might be happy together! They might never know doubt or misery!

Recalled to herself cruelly, as if by the sharp sting of a bee, Aurette shuddered, and her heavenly vision fled, leaving behind it a regret like that which comes at awakening from a marvelous, unfinished dream.

The next morning, on entering the drawing-room, she found upon the table a magnificent bouquet of flowers. Blue iris, as dainty as butterflies, tulips of oriental colors and bizarre contours, anemones of every shade, crimson roses, tube-roses as white and

queenly as lilies, and ferns as fragile as the richest lace; a rare blending of color and fragrance.

"It is for my sister, is it not?" she said to the servant who handed her a note. She at once imagined that it was a gift from Armand to Julia

"Excuse me, mademoiselle, but it is for you."

There was then, some one in the world who had thought to send her flowers!

The doctor wrote her:

"You are wrong to neglect flowers, my dear child, they are the only friends that return you a hundred fold for all you give to them. Try to accustom yourself to them, and if they awaken a little interest within you, I will discover it and send you others." Your old friend,

DOCTOR ROZEL.

Touched by this mark of affection, and agitated with another confused, indefinable sentiment, Aurette bent over the odorous blossoms and lifted them lightly. In their graceful frailty, each flower preserved its distinct individuality, some drooping, others holding their heads erect, like human beings.

"Friends," said Aurette, "yes, dear friends. It was not their fault if I bestowed them upon one who could not read their sweet message!"

She looked at the delicate hues and the infinite variety of form of these darlings of spring, these messengers of joys to come, and she asked herself how she could have dreaded their presence, on account of the memories they awakened.

"I was blind!" she exclaimed, "voluntarily and stupidly blind! O my sweet ones, you will console me, will you not?"

For the first time since her affliction a beneficent dew fell from her eyes; two glistening tears slipped into the corolla of a purple iris and nestled in its velvety petals. She took the exquisite bouquet gently, tenderly, as if it were a little child she was caressing, and lifted it to her lips; and with passionate reverence she kissed the silken, perfumed blossoms; those friends which die to-day to be born again to-morrow; those friends which nature has given us with so lavish a hand to charm the eye, to intoxicate us with their odors and their generous smiling beauty—sweet comforters for every moral woe.

CHAPTER XIII.

Several days later, Aurette, who had been taking a walk, followed by Bruno, was hastening to the Nest a little before dusk. The March sun had set in a rosy splendor, which foreboded a frosty night. The pathways were embalmed with violets, but the ground was frozen underfoot. On nearing the park gate, Bruno stopped suddenly with bristling hair, and began to bark furiously.

Aurette was brave and besides, with this enormous dog, so near the house, she ran but little risk of serious danger. She approached the gate, after silencing the dog, and saw advancing toward her a woman with a shawl over her head which fell about her shoulders, and in her arms a heavy bundle.

"What do you wish?" said Aurette a little roughly, "You must not stand about the gates in this way."

"Pardon me, miss, they told me you were kind-hearted—and I wish to speak to you."

The woman was standing so close to her that even in the fading light, Aurette could see her

plainly; she was young and still beautiful, in spite of the sunburn and the lines of care on her face. The bundle moved and Aurette saw that it was a child. Bruno who had been quieted, ventured his nose under the shawl and seemed satisfied.

"What do you wish of me? Be quick, for it is late!"

"Yes, miss; it is this. We lived at Port-Thibault, near here, on the Loire. My husband was a good workman, and I am a seamstress, at least I passed for a seamstress in the world, and we were very poor; then my husband became dissipated and deserted me and the little one—I have been working hard all the time, but there were debts which my husband left, and I grew sick and so did the baby—he is well now, but I am still weak—Christmas I could not pay for the house, and they sold all that we had and turned us out. I am on my way to Angers, but it is still some distance, and I am not strong—I heard that you were good and I stopped. If you can do nothing for me, I will go on to Angers."

The young woman's voice grew fainter at the last words, and lifting the bundle which had slipped from her arms, she made a movement to start.

"Your husband deserted you?" asked Aurette.

"Yes, miss. I do not know why—"

"You loved him?"

"Ah! how I loved him! he was a god to me! I loved him only too well!"

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-five."

"How long were you married?"

"Three years, but I was only happy one year. After my baby was born he seemed to care for me no longer."

"Deserted!" murmured Aurette.

It was now almost dark; the air was chilly, and Bruno feeling it, began to push his nose against the gate demanding entrance.

"Do you know anyone who would recommend you?" asked Aurette.

The woman named two proprietors in the neighborhood, for whom she had worked.

"Very well," said Aurette, "come with me."

Walking a little ahead of the wretched woman, she went straight to the kitchen, where, after putting her in charge of the servants, she went to join her father and sister.

An open telegram lay upon the table; M. Leneil appeared absorbed in a late paper, and Julia with an air of consternation was vigorously plying her needle. Aurette took up the telegram and read: "*A son named Jean. Affectionately, Charles.*"

Charles had a son, named Jean for M. Leneil! Aurette felt her throat convulsed with a singular emotion.

This message which had traversed so many lands and seas to bring them this great news seemed to her as mysterious as a dream. Bombay—one of the cities which one pictures white or golden, on the shores of some distant ocean, or at the mouth of a vast river. So far away, but so near to her heart!

Aurette turned to her father.

"Have you read this, papa?" she said with an infinite sweetness in her voice.

He did not respond.

"A son," continued she, "a little Jean Leneil, like his grandfather."

Her father gave her a stern look.

"It is the son of an ingrate," said he. "God grant that he may not be like his mother! I shall never forget, my child, what you have suffered for her fault, and the fault of my unfortunate son. If you

hope to move me to pity, you are deceiving yourselves, both of you, my children. When I can ignore the affront to my family, I may be able to forgive. At present, I do not wish to hear of it, neither to-day nor later on."

Aurette instinctively recoiled. In this light, her father appeared to her as an impartial judge; without wrath, but without pity. She knew that the insult resented by her with so much vehemence had left a deeper, if a tardier, imprint on the soul of M. Leneil. She realized fully that to oppose him would be folly, for the present at least, so she kept silent.

Julia continued to work with extraordinary activity. Aurette divined that she also had endeavored to intercede for the little new-born, and that she heard him convicted of original sin. After a long time she said as if she had just that moment entered:

"Papa, I had quite an adventure this evening: I met a poor woman and her child deserted by her husband. I took her to the kitchen and made them give her some food. It is very cold; will you permit her to spend the night in the pavilion? The child is so young. It is a boy, and so wretched."

Between this abandoned child and the disowned grandchild so far away, she could not refrain from

establishing a secret resemblance. M. Leneil felt it also; he looked at his daughter mournfully, and found in her eyes only benignity and pardon.

"How old is he?" he asked in a broken voice.

"About two years old."

"Do as you like," he replied, taking up his review again.

Aurette walked behind him and stooping over, she kissed the hand which held the book. Before he could turn his head she had left the drawing-room; Julia had followed her noiselessly.

"Aurette," she said in a low voice, "papa will never forgive them. I saw it in his eyes when he opened the telegram."

"Never! that is a long time," said Aurette with a confident expression which astonished Julia. "We must hope! and above all, we must not renounce the little one who was born to be a very powerful auxiliary! Come with me."

While speaking, Aurette had taken a bunch of keys but little used, and after lighting a lantern and throwing a shawl over her head, followed by her sister, she started across the dark courtyard which adjoined the house.

The pavilion was a little detached building which served formerly to lodge some transient guest when the house was full. In days gone by, before M. Leneil had made additions to the Nest, it was here that the huntsmen had their meals served when they did not wish to take the trouble to make a toilet for dinner. There was one large apartment on the second floor which contained a bed and other furniture.

Aurette took from a closet, two heavy linen sheets, and with Julia's assistance, spread them on the bed. A match started a fire in the chimney where the wood was already laid, and suddenly the joyous light danced on the walls, enlivening with a transitory brilliancy the sombre room with its ancient furniture.

"They will not be cold this night," said Aurette, throwing another piece of wood upon the fire, "and to-morrow—to-morrow, we will see what we can do for them."

"Is the child pretty?" asked Julia as she helped her sister arrange things, here and there.

"I did not see it well," replied Aurette, with an abstracted air. Suddenly she grasped her sister's arm firmly: "Deserted, Julia, don't you understand!

Deserted cruelly, with her child, after marriage. Can't you imagine what this woman has had to suffer? I know, and my heart bleeds for her."

Julia looked at her sister, without daring to speak.

"I believed that I was the only one who was suffering; that such a thing had never happened to any one else. And here is a woman, a hundred times more unfortunate than I! And this child who has no longer a father. My God, what misery there is in the world! What griefs, what incurable wounds!"

She gazed thoughtfully into the fire whose flickering lights and shadows danced upon the old-fashioned flowered curtains and the mouldings of the polished furniture; Julia listened, feeling that the door of her sister's soul which had so long been sealed, was open at last.

"This child," said Aurette, "has no longer a father, and little Jean, so far away, has no longer a grandfather! As soon as I read the telegram it flashed across me that God had sent these deserted ones for us to shelter, in memory, and for the love of the other little one whom we may perhaps never see, Charles' little son!"

"Yes," said Julia, quickly, "you are right."

Aurette looked at her as if she had been awakened from a dream.

"Do you know, Julia, it seems to me that I have been gravely at fault. I have not known how to bear my troubles. I have been weak, selfish—"

"You!" cried Julia, "it is not true!"

"I have been egotistical," continued Aurette, "I have not considered what effect my sorrows might have upon others, and I blame myself to-day that papa will not forgive Charles."

"No!" cried Julia, "you must not say such a thing! He would forgive him were it not that the Bertholons—"

Aurette silenced her with a look of entreaty.

"Still, it is my fault. If I had treated their conduct lightly, if I had remained unchanged, patient and courageous, papa would never have been so incensed. I have done this wrong and how must I repair it?"

Julia leaned her head against her sister's shoulder and wept softly.

"My whole life will not suffice for it," continued Aurette, drawing the almost maternal arms closer around her, but without ceasing to follow the thread

of her thoughts. "What must I do to gain papa so that the little Jean Leneil may be received into the arms of his family!"

"Aurette," sobbed Julia, "we will do everything possible, but tell me that you will not be unhappy, that you will not reproach yourself."

"I have spoiled two years of your life, however, but please God, I will repair it!"

She gave her sister a fond kiss which testified to her soul's awakening, then left the room which she had warmed with her sweet charity, and where charity in its turn had melted the ice about her heart.

The poor woman had not deceived her in anything; the information obtained by Mlle. Leneil the next day was of a most satisfactory nature. Before her husband's desertion he had brought her to Port-Thibault, where she had neither relatives nor friends, or any one who was interested in her. What she wished was steady work to enable her to earn bread for herself and child. Aurette soon furnished her with it; from a kind of superstition she desired to retain at the Nest these wanderers, who had reached it at the same moment as the news of the birth of little Jean, and whom she almost regarded as messengers

from heaven. M. Leneil did not oppose it; whether he vaguely divined what was passing in his daughter's heart, or only that he was gratified at seeing her ardently interested in anything in the outside world.

CHAPTER XIV.

Two years had passed since the Sacrament Sunday when Aurette's life had been so unexpectedly metamorphosed; upon the terrace, in the same spot where she had sat with her betrothed, Armand Deblay was sitting, looking across the landscape toward the Loire, enjoying the soft, balmy air of an evening in June. The doctor was chatting with M. Leneil; Julia sat near them in silence, her eyes fixed upon the foliage of the park trees, then in all their glory, gilded by the last rays of the sun. She seemed to be turning over in her mind some embarrassing question, and at last, looking up at the young man, she said in a low voice:

"So, you think this sufficient; to be a physician in town and make visits, for which you are well paid, and to be a director of a hospital and receive a handsome salary!"

Armand did not appear greatly agitated at this censure.

"Pardon me, mademoiselle, but we also give gratuitous consultations."

"Yes, I know," said Julia, with impatience, "a beautiful affair!"

"What must a physician do then to win the approval of heaven?"

"Merit it! He should go out into the country to give free consultations, to see what is happening there, to see the sick whom ignorance and superstition have made more so. To prevent them from running to quacks who make them commit follies and injure themselves so that they may come back to them to cure them."

"The quacks would fall upon us bodily, mademoiselle, and our country confreres would accuse us of taking the bread from their mouths."

"In giving gratuitous consultations?"

"Yes, since it would prevent them from making paying visits."

Julia turned away with an air of comical humor. At this moment a group of children crossed the end of the lawn; they were walking along gravely, the smaller ones in the middle, holding the others by the hand.

"What little troop is that," asked M. Rozel.

"They are Aurette's urchins," replied M. Leneil, "she has a half dozen like them to come and walk in

the garden Sunday, when they have been good during the week."

"Where do you get your recruits?" said the doctor to Aurette, who was watching the children with a dreamy smile.

"One is the child of the ironer who does you those beautiful shirts," she replied; "he is the smallest, the Benjamin, and at the same time the fonnder of the institution. Two of them are the coachman's, one of the cook's, and two others of the the gardener's."

"Great heavens! how have you caused to spring up from the earth, as it were, so numerous a progeny to people, who to my knowledge possess none!" said the doctor greatly amused.

"They have recalled the banished," responded Aurette, throwing a side glance at her father. "These good folks conceal their children as they would a crime, for fear of interfering with their situations; but when little Charles—"

"Who?" said M. Rozel quickly.

"Charles is the son of the ironer; when he had been installed at the pavilion at his mother's petticoats, there was no longer a reason for concealing the other little fellows; they soon appeared, one by

one, poor, bashful creatures; it was very droll, I assure you."

"I can imagine so. But if it is not too inquisitive, I would like to ask what you do with this little band?"

"They go to school; on holidays I tell them stories, and then they walk together decorously, as you see, in the garden. Yesterday little Charles started to pluck a flower and every hand was raised to prevent him. They are well trained, I assure you."

"And what will you do with them after awhile?"

"What will please God and their parents—make good men and women of them, if it is possible."

"And this amuses you?"

A beautiful look from Aurette answered the question better than words.

The doctor and M. Leneil followed the little band with their eyes, as they retired in good order, one after another. The same thought had crossed their minds, for the father turned his head to avoid the look of his old friend.

Armand and Julia had resumed their quarrel; Bruno, who had vainly been from one to the other, presenting his friendly head as a peace offering, ended by lying down between them, lengthwise, in

order to separate them should the dispute grow serious, doubtless.

"I do not understand how one can reconcile one's self to charging for doing so little," said Julia, throwing away a sprig of grass which she had been rolling around her finger.

"So little!" replied Armand, "Do visits at night count for nothing? When one loves his sleep, is there no merit in tearing one's self from bed, in winter, especially?"

Julia, suddenly changing her humor, looked at him almost with pity, but her sarcasm very soon reappeared.

"There is, when one loves his sleep!" said she. "But really, are you a sluggard?"

"I confess it! But mademoiselle, is it possible that you have never had a desire to sleep?"

"I? I could sleep till noon! Not when anyone needs me however."

Aurette's eyes looking beyond her father and the doctor, sought Julia's with an expression of tender recognizance. Could she ever forget the night when her sister watched over her? How long ago, already in the past, was that sorrowful epoch! In remembering it, she was almost ashamed of having

suffered so much, and so short a time previous. Was she cured then?

The sky had become an undecided color, and the stars like golden spangles seemed to spring from the firmament; Aurette recalled how many times their rays had pierced her bleeding heart. No, she was not entirely cured since an inexpressible melancholy always oppressed her at twilight. She rose gently and, unobserved, descended to the garden which was redolent with the fragrance of heliotrope. Armand and Julia continued their discussion.

"I see very well, mademoiselle, that you are determined to censure the poor town doctors, but, to be entirely candid, I would like to know what you would approve."

"Would approve? Ah! that is not difficult, and I will tell you. When a physician earns money beyond his own needs, when he has a good practice, is already known, or even celebrated, and when his name inspires confidence, he should found a dispensary—"

"At his own home, mademoiselle?"

"Yes; he should take a house large enough for that; a dispensary for sick children, for example;

for children, hereafter! It is better to keep them from dying—"

"Than adults, mademoiselle?"

"Yes," replied Julia imperturbably, "because there are wicked people among adults, and children are, as yet, good."

"Will you permit me to note the word *yet*, which does not indicate an absolute confidence in the excellence of human nature?'

"I will permit you to note it, sir, because it is useless to endeavor to evade you; you wish to escape my reasoning."

"Heaven defend me! Besides I could not if I would."

They had instinctively lowered their voices, without perceiving it. Doctor Rozel and his friend had embarked on some great social question and were oblivious to all but themselves. Aurette was walking slowly at some distance from them, and the silhouette of her elegant form was outlined on the fine, gray mist which softened the color of the foliage.

"Then you confess I am right, and that it is your duty to found a dispensary?"

Armand did not respond; he looked at her so intently that she grew embarrassed.

"For the little ones, you know, for the little ones who suffer. Their mothers are ignorant, often foolish, nearly always poor! They must be helped. It would do so much good."

Julia felt her heart beating more rapidly than there was any occasion for it; in the soft, sweet twilight she could see nothing but Armand's two dark eyes fixed upon her violet ones, which she lowered in vain. She could feel those eyes upon her own, through her drooping eyelids.

"Julia," said he in a low voice, but which she heard as if it were the sound of a clarion, "I can do nothing alone toward organizing the dispensary which you wish—but if you will help me—"

"I?" exclaimed Julia trying to laugh, but not succeeding.

"Yes, you. A doctor is awkward about such matters; all he can do is to lend the aid of his science, if he has any—but a doctor's wife—"

Julia rose abruptly. Armand detained her by a fold of her dress which he grasped lightly, then relinquished immediately; as lightly as it was, she felt it, and remained standing, immovable.

"The wife of a doctor can do all that she wishes for the welfare of sick children, and the welfare of the doctor himself; on his return home, how happy it would make him to know that his wife awaited him!"

"Egotist!" murmured Julia with a faint smile.

"Yes, I admit it. But it is the duty of the good to correct evil. If you will correct me I will be very docile, indeed I will. And I know a little hotel in a beautiful street—"

"New?" demanded Julia, almost aggressively.

"No, mademoiselle, old. I said a beautiful old street, and a little old hotel, with two or three large apartments below, which would be exactly the affair you wish; there is even a wonderful kitchen at the end of the last hall! A kitchen with a quaint stove; one would say that it was made expressly to please you, for there is another room at the opposite end of the building for the waitress. It was evidently constructed by Providence himself for sick children, for there, one can prepare remedies, poultices—"

"And soups?" added Julia quickly.

"And soups, certainly, and little broths, and warm milk, and all kinds of good things. But this is the business of the doctor's wife—"

"Hush, my sister is coming!" said Julia brusquely, almost in a whisper. "Before we have the right to speak of little broths and such things, she must be able to be left here alone, with papa; it is necessary—"

She stopped speaking. Aurette passed behind them on her way to the drawing-room, and ere long the grand piano under her hands found its soul again; and as she had played it two years before, she began the Songs Without Words, by Mendelssohn, which she had never played since that time.

At first her fingers wandered tremulously over the half-forgotten notes, then her touch grew firmer and the exquisite melody floated heavenward like a prayer.

"Oh!" whispered Julia, "I am sure she is weeping!'

The piano was not weeping, however; the music increased in an intensity of burning ardor; but it was not sorrowful; as in other days, Aurette offered up a supplication for all earthly miseries, but she no longer felt her own.

M. Leneil had ceased talking; he remembered that evening, and like Julia, he feared that Aurette might be suffering. The last note died away in the

immobile air; no one dared to speak. The piano resounded again; this time it was a simple strain of extreme naivete; Schubert's *Tu es le repos;* never has any one so well expressed the peace of a soul.

Leaving the piano, Aurette rejoined the little group of listeners. There was still enough light in the sky for them to see distinctly her perfectly calm and beautiful face.

"Are you cold, papa?" she said in her sweet, musical voice, resting her hand upon her father's shoulder.

Instead of answering her he drew her to him and embraced her. There was no trace of tears on Aurette's cheeks. Although still susceptible to melancholy, she had passed the period of tempests, and henceforth would soar above all memories.

When the uncle and nephew left the Nest, Armand was absolutely certain of winning Julia, though she had not yet given an actual consent. After saying good-night to M. Leneil she went to her sister's room where they often remained talking together till a late hour.

She would have been willing to wait for a favorable moment in which to recount to her what had happened; she had even ingeniously planned to

broach the subject after skillful circumlocution, but all this strategy crumbled to pieces before Aurette's grave eyes.

"My dear sister," she cried, "what will you think of me? He has asked me to be his wife and I have not refused him!"

Aurette said nothing; her beautiful golden brown eyes, soft and velvety like the coreopsis in the Autumn gardens, no longer saw her sister, they were seeking afar off in the vague night, the ghost of bygone days when she also had not refused to be the wife of another man.

How long ago was it? It was like a dream, a bad dream. Julia became alarmed.

"Aurette," she said, "we will wait a very long time, as long as you wish. I have no desire to leave you, and I told him—"

"Do you love him?" asked her sister in a slow, abstracted manner.

"I—yes, certainly I love him!" responded Julia, whose delicate face was as rosy as the flush of dawn. "And he loves me; oh, yes, I am sure he loves me!"

Aurette sat there silent and motionless; Julia felt a great pity for her, and reproached herself

bitterly for having so abruptly awakened so many sad memories in a soul but lately healed.

"Aurette," said she with an humble, touching grace, "forgive me for being so foolish; I am only an awkward little girl, but I love you, I love you deeply, you know it. Tell me you are not angry with me, please. Scold me even, if you wish, but say something, speak to me."

"Scold you?" said Aurette with infinite sweetness, "you?"

She began mechanically to search in her pocket for a little bunch of keys which seldom left her, and going to a large chest of drawers of ancient mosaic work, which fitted one whole panel of the wall, she knelt before it and carefully opened the bottom drawer. Julia, without understanding, watched her as she drew from it a long, flat box. Aurette then rose and placed the box upon a table, and untied the knots of the white cords which were around it; her movements were all slow, as if she were performing an act of piety.

The knots untied, she lifted the pasteboard cover, removed the soft paper wrappings, and the light of the lamp fell upon a rich material, as white and

airy as silver tissue. Aurette unfolded it and revealed the shimmering silken stuff which was to have been her bridal robe.

"How foolish!" she murmured, "and how ridiculous sorrow sometimes makes one. I imagined that I would never look at it again, and I have often said to myself that it would be my shroud."

She gathered up a handful of the rich brocade and spread it over the carpet in heavy, magnificent folds, then she threw one end of it over Julia's shoulder, who stood there draped like an antique statue.

"This shall be your wedding dress, dearest, and may it bring you happiness."

Their eyes met, their arms entwined, with the superb brocade falling around them like a graceful scarf.

Julia, who was very practical, took the end of the silk and began to fold it carefully to return it to the box.

"He is a good boy," said she, all the while apparently absorbed in her work. "I hardly think papa will oppose it; or the doctor, for if he was not willing I suppose he would not have brought him here so often."

"Without a doubt," replied Aurette, "and for my part, I can only rejoice at it, for he seems to me good, energetic and intelligent."

"Yes, and he is going to found a dispensary," said Julia, "and he says there is even a kitchen, so that we may have soup—"

She laughed merrily, and her eyes glistened with happy tears.

"But understand," she added, "nothing is settled; only, I have told him we would think of it when—after awhile, later on, not immediately, at any rate."

"Why not immediately?" asked Aurette gently.

"Immediately? oh no! It is necessary that—'

"That what?"

"That you—that papa—oh, I hardly know, myself! That Charles should have returned."

"Not at all! You must marry as soon as possible without waiting for anything! you see, Julia, when two people are well acquainted, long engagements profit nothing, and when one is not sure of one's self, they are no better sometimes."

Aurette's voice trembled slightly; Julia put her arms around her caressingly.

"I will never have the courage to leave you and

papa here alone, Aurette, little mother," she murmured fondly.

"Don't you think we will have sufficient strength to do without you?" said Aurette, smiling.

"Don't jest," said Julia, reproachfully, "I am in earnest, and if you do not take it seriously—"

"I was never more serious in my life, dearest. You have been an incomparable sister, I know."

"Oh!"

"Incomparable," insisted Aurette, "as young as you are; you have helped me in my trouble as no one else could have done. It is on this account that the thought of seeing you happy is to me so sweet and comforting. Do not fear to leave me with papa, we will get along beautifully together, and your happiness will be to us a source of perpetual joy."

"It will be so droll!" said Julia with an air of deep meditation.

"What, dearie?"

"To be the wife of Doctor Deblay. Will there be a brass plate on the door with *Physician* above it? No, when one is well known, this is not necessary."

She reflected a moment then added mischievously: "But there will be a large plate with this inscription: 'Dispensary for sick children.' This will be

the most beautiful gift that he could place among my wedding presents. I would not give it for all the jewels in the world. And you and I will make little jackets and skirts, such warm ones! And the shoes, we will not be able to make them of course, but Doctor Deblay will furnish them!"

"Go to bed," exclaimed Aurette, giving her a gentle push toward her room, "you must sleep."

"Sleep! no, indeed! I am too happy for that! I am going to lie awake and dream of the dispensary, and the doctor—and my wedding dress. O Aurette!"

She turned and threw her arms around her sister's neck, with a delicious movement of supple grace, then she went to her own room which was peopled with golden visions.

CHAPTER XV.

One warm, sweet morning in September, an Angerin September, as clear as a summer day, but more delicately veiled in a blue, transparent mist, Julia, before arraying herself in her bridal dress, ran to the park and garden, once more to see each dear, familiar corner of the Nest.

Bruno followed her, step by step, slackening his pace when she lingered, and bounding by her side when she hastened onward. He knew, the good dog, that she was going away; the peculiar intuition of his species revealed to him that she was about to leave the old Nest, and he showed his affection for her in a thousand different ways. From time to time she patted him on the head affectionately, and continued her pilgrimage.

Adieu to the lonely terrace on the border of the ravine where Aurette had wept bitterly in the past; adieu to the walks of the park where Sidonie had plotted her treason; adieu to the shady circle around the old plane-tree where the children had all played, and where her father loved to rest! Before going

to the conservatory, Julia turned to look across the landscape which was enveloped in a white, airy vapor; soon she would be clothed in *her* white bridal veil.

She found Aurette in the conservatory in her morning robe; upon a table before her there was a bouquet of exquisite flowers, truly a poem of pure love, resting in the crystal vase.

"This is for you," said Aurette with a fond smile. "It is to be sent to the little old hotel in the little old street near the cathedral, where you will find it this evening, and it will take with it the benediction of your little mother."

Julia bent over the golden Japan lilies, the tube-roses, delicate asphodels, poppies, and Marvel of Peru with its intoxicating odors, and in the perfume of these lovely blossoms she breathed the beauty and nobility of Aurette's soul.

"My heart fails me, Aurette," said she, pressing close to her.

But Aurette was brave; she embraced her and pushed her gently from her arms.

"Your happiness is over yonder in the little old hotel," she said smilingly, "and we will be happy in your joy."

"If only Charles were here!" sighed Julia, gazing at the superb diamond of her ring, the gift of her brother. "Tell me, dear, do you think he will ever return?"

"Some day," replied her sister; "have patience."

"Little Jean is already six months old, and we have not seen him; he will grow up without knowing us. But it is not his fault."

"Patience!" repeated Aurette.

She hoped that Julia's children might open the door to the little exile, but she would not say it, and so she led her gently toward the Nest.

In a cloud of tulle and sheeny silk which rustled as she walked along, Julia entered the carriage with the others; the horses soon carried them to the cathedral where the bells were ringing triumphantly. As in a dream she stepped upon the crimson carpet which led to the altar, under a shower of harmony from the thundering organs. In a few moments she was married. Her eyes sought for Aurette and found her.

How beautiful her sister looked! so slender and noble in her silver-gray silk. She refused to wear a more youthful costume, but for this day was

attired as a young mother—a day so unique in her life.

In the evening the young couple found Aurette's bouquet on the centre table in the vast drawing-room of their new home. The perfume of myrtle and lilies floated upward to the lofty, sculptured ceiling and evoked sweet thoughts of the lovely donor in the hearts of those who loved her.

Aurette and her father had returned alone to the Nest, grave but not sad. With the full assurance of Julia's happiness, there mingled another emotion, not so lofty, but very consoling; all their friends had been present to witness the ceremony; the sympathy and esteem of the whole town had followed the youthful pair to the altar. Who thought of Sidonie? Who remembered that she had ever existed?

Aurette knelt beside her father with clasped hands, and said to him in a low voice:

"Papa, for Julia's sake, recall your son."

M. Leneil took within his own the two outstretched hands.

"My child," he said, "do not undo the reparatory work of time; this woman is forgotten; do not

ask for her return; she will bring us only shame and sorrow."

Aurette bent her head; her father was right, she knew it. She kissed his pale cheeks, and going to the piano, played him all of his favorite airs, in order to lull him into a sweet and restful sleep.

Then, when he was asleep, she opened the window and gazed at the stars.

They did not make her weep now. They were the faithful friends who watched her as she silently accomplished her mission of peace and benedictions. Aurette was happy, yes, happy in the joy of others, and above all, in that which she had bestowed upon them. Troubles, vigils and anguish had finished within her the work of restoration; the wound in her soul was healed; at most, she might suffer again if some unforseen circumstances brought her face to face with the man she had so tenderly, so passionately, so vainly loved! They were living in different worlds at present, how could she meet him?

She thought of what she would have suffered had she realized her dream and married Raoul Bertholon, when she should have discovered the poverty of his heart and the weakness of his intellect;

in a great outburst of recognition, she blessed the destiny which had spared her that grief and humiliation. Ah! it was a hundred times better to live a life useful to others, a life of self renunciation, than that of an old woman crouching amid ruins, crushed and bruised each moment by the debris falling upon her bleeding heart.

CHAPTER XVI.

The following winter, Aurette and her father, as well as the young Deblay household, subscribed to the *Bordier* concerts, in order to hear some fine instrumental music, brilliantly executed.

All those who take an interest in symphony music, know that Angers is the only town in France where for five years a society has been sustained, which, on every Sunday, for six months of the year, renders a new programme of the works of the deceased masters, and those of the new school which are noticeably good.

One Sunday in December, Aurette, who was a little late in visiting a sick friend, requested her father not to wait for her, but to go to the concert without her, where she would soon join him.

M. Leneil, who was a great admirer of the *Septieme Symphonie* which would open the programme, readily assented, and upon arriving, sent the carriage back promptly for his daughter.

Aurette stepped from the coupe before the door of the opera house; the concert had begun, a fine

drizzling rain had chased away the snowflakes; only a vender of programmes ventured outside the door. Two or three people had taken refuge under the peristyle; Mlle. Leneil, after giving some directions to the coachman, turned toward the entrance, and was confronted by a man, who stood before her in an attitude of respect, even of humiliation.

Without looking at him, Aurette was about to take from her purse a piece of money, when she heard a voice, which sounded to her like the echo of a voice loved in the past.

"Mademoiselle," said the poor fellow, in a shamefaced manner.

Very poor in fact, and very miserable, in spite of his wife's millions. It was Raoul Bertholon.

"Mademoiselle," said he, "permit me to escort you to the door."

Aurette raised her head; under her veil, the fugitive blushes of other days had already two or three times glowed, then paled, upon her cheeks. She looked at her old lover, and notwithstanding the control which she had over herself, her soul was moved with pity.

He! so changed, so aged, so to speak! His clothes were new, but hung loosely on his thin form;

his eyes had a troubled expression; his face was flushed; a whole existence of wrangling, quarrels, and recriminations could be read in this weary countenance.

"So then," thought Mlle. Leneil, "this is what his wife and mother have made of him!"

She bowed to him and took a step forward; he stopped her with an imploring gesture, designating the deserted streets, and the complete solitude which the rain and Sunday made around them.

"Mademoiselle, I only wish to say a word to you, I entreat you to listen. I come here every Sunday to meet you—I pray you—"

She stood still, agitated at the sight of him thus imploring her; he, who had formerly accepted her love as a god accepts the incense of the faithful.

"I have sought for an opportunity," said he with his hat still in his hand, "to beg you to forgive me."

She made a movement of haughty dignity which he had feared, and which precipitated his words.

"I have acted unpardonably, unworthily, I know. I do not deserve your pity; but if you knew how I regret it—(he lowered his voice still more) and how I have been punished!"

She felt that he spoke the truth, and her heart melted with compassion for this man who had suffered so much.

"I am punished, you do not dream to what extent, and I will not tell you—I implore you to say that you forgive me! I can perhaps then more patiently endure the life to which I have so miserably doomed myself!"

"If you desire it, sir," responded Aurette, "I can tell you that you have been forgiven for a very long time."

The gentleness of her voice atoned for the coolness of the words. There was no longer a spark of love in her heart, it was only a great pity. She started toward the peristyle, he followed her.

"Do you despise me?" said he in a broken voice, with an expression of indescribable anguish.

"No. I pity you. Adieu."

She disappeared under the doorway. He remained immovable for a moment, bare-headed, looking at the place where she had stood; then putting on his hat he walked slowly away in the rain and sleet, along the deserted quay.

The first part of the *symphonie en la* ended as Aurette entered. Hardly was she seated when that

exquisite plaint which is called the *Allegretto*, began. As the violins wailed forth their melodious lamentations, she seemed to follow in her fancy the funeral train of her love, so long dead; she regretted it as she would some souvenir, some very ancient thing which belonged to another century; she felt for it the same melancholy which is inspired by the sorrows of others in a book, read once, then read again by chance, after many years. It was no longer grief, nor even melancholy, it was a transient gloom, like a cloud which passes across the sun on a morning in September, and hangs for a moment over the golden woods

The *Allegretto* was finished and the applause deafening. Aurette looked around her. At her right was her father; at her left, Julia, with Armand. She felt herself warm up in this nest padded with tenderness. The cloth of her father's cloak and the velvet of Julia's mantle gave her a sensation of sweet, familiar things which were dear to her. A whispered word from Julia augmented still more that feeling of comfort, when suddenly, by contrast, her thoughts followed the poor man who was wandering in the cold, drizzling rain toward an inhospitable fireside, where he would never find peace or

joy. Aurette sighed, and an involuntary shiver which shook her shoulders at the thought of the icy air without, accompanied these reflections.

"Are you cold?" asked Julia. "What horrible weather!"

"Horrible, really," responded Mlle. Leneil, "yet it is comfortable here."

CHAPTER XVII.

Sidonie's room was carpeted entirely with China mats; white mats, very fine and silken, which one seldom sees in Europe. The windows were draped with curtains of thin, white muslin; everything was white and fresh to the eye, although the heat was heavy and stifling.

Sidonie lay upon a low bed, panting with fever; Charles sat very close to her, watching her with deep compassion as she struggled against the implacable enemy.

"Do not look at me!" she cried with impatience, opening her eyes after a short sleep. "You must not look at me as if you were trying to find out if I am going to die!"

"Sidonie!" exclaimed Charles broken-heartedly.

"It is all right, for I am going to die; ah, well, just so I die in peace!"

She turned to him almost angrily; as weak as she was, her aggressive nature had not lost its hold on her.

"Listen, Charles," said she.

Her voice was but a whisper; he leaned over her to hear it, and she grasped with both hands the lapels of his linen coat, and held them with all the energy she had left.

"Listen. After I am dead, you must return to France. There is no use in your remaining here to wear yourself out. Your father will pardon you. Do not wait to write to ask his permission. Go at once with the little one. Oh, you will be at rest then! When I am dead you will be welcome. I was the mar-joy."

Almost out of breath, she spoke in short, nervous sentences; he wished to respond, to defend himself and the others, but she would not permit him; still clutching feebly at his coat, she continued:

"After all, you know, it is but natural; I would not have believed that your father would have held out so long—it is the fault of that idiot—Bertholon, I see; *that* put the finishing touch to our difficulties."

She brusquely relinquished the lapels of his coat; her husband bent over her to kiss her burning forehead, but she repulsed him impatiently.

"Do not kiss me, it might do you harm. Tell Aurette that I give the little one to her; I am sure she will be touched by it."

The wraith of her old ironical smile flitted across Sidonie's lips, then vanished.

"After all, you know, she will rear him more after your heart than I ever could have been able to do. And I— I am so tired— ah, I really need to rest—this heat makes me so drowsy."

Her husband took a large fan and waved it gently to give her a little air.

"No," she said wearily, "that makes it worse. Ah me, how sweet it was at the Nest, on summer evenings, when the wind blew from the Loire—it was so cool—"

She hushed and closed her eyes; Charles thought she was asleep, but in a moment she opened them again.

"You are almost as sick as I am," said she, looking at his worn, thin face and gray hair. "My poor Charles, it is all my fault. I have brought you nothing but misery!"

"It is the climate," said Charles to calm her.

"No, it is I," she replied obstinately. "Without me, you would not have stayed here more than a year. But you are young; you will marry again."

"Sidonie, I implore you to hush!" said the unhappy man, clasping his hands.

She turned away with an air of lassitude.

"But that will make no difference," she said slowly, "when I am dead, how can it hurt me?—Kiss me, Charles; I ask you to do it this time."

He stooped over and kissed her brow and eyelids; lightly, so as not to catch the dreaded fever; tenderly, because he had loved her passionately, foolishly.

"Tell Aurette that it was very wrong of me not to take her advice," continued Sidonie. "She was right; your father was right. You must go as soon as—immediately after—And then, the little one—you must speak to him sometimes of me, so that he may not forget me. I have not been good in my life, but it seems to me that I have not been a bad mother to him."

"Do you wish to see him?" asked Charles, after a slight hesitation.

"No. Leave him on the mountain in the fresh air. It would make him ill to come here in this heat—and then, you have not time—he would arrive too late. So what good would it do?"

An expression of bitter sadness passed over Sidonie's face at the memory of her little boy.

"It is for the best," she said, "you could never have been happy in this way, my poor Charles. I did wrong, but I did not think it would end so badly; you must not—you must not think unkindly of me for it."

She closed her eyes and fell into a troubled sleep, while Charles bowed down with grief, reviewed the past, without finding anything there but the fleeting, deceptive illusions which he had mistaken for happiness.

Two days afterward, she died.

CHAPTER XVIII.

M. Leneil, seated beneath the great plane-tree was lost in meditation. The summer day was peculiarly beautiful, and the glowing five o'clock sun flooded with golden lights the hedge of yoke-elms and the sloping lawns. The gardener approached holding in his hand something small and glittering.

"See what I found this morning, sir," said he, "it must be that I never raked deep enough before to-day."

M. Leneil held out his hand, then started with surprise.

"This!" said he, "after so many years!"

Aurette put aside her work to examine the object of so much comment.

"Oh! it is Charles' little spoon!" she exclaimed. "It has been twenty years since it was lost! The nurse mislaid it while feeding Julia, under this tree. To think of it having been found, to-day of all others!"

"To-day!" repeated M. Leneil.

"After twenty years, papa; is it not astonishing? When they had searched for it so often?"

The father had aged somewhat, but his white hair and beard gave to his face an expression of great sweetness, and the sharp, resolute glance of other days had almost disappeared from his eyes.

"Twenty years," said he, "how old are you then, Aurette?"

"Twenty-eight, papa," she responded gaily, "and I enjoy life I assure you!"

"You have not, however, had a cheerful look for some time. You are concealing something from me; I am sure of it."

"A surprise, papa, I have planned—but we will speak of it directly, if you wish. I see Julia at the end of the lawn."

Julia, who was on the eve of maternity, advanced slowly; she was even more beautiful than three years before. The two sisters embraced each other, and Mme. Deblay sat down near her father, while Aurette slipped away.

"What is this I see?" she exclaimed. "Is it possible! The famous lost spoon! I always believed that it was a legend, a story invented to make us bring back to the house our spoons when we had

little dinners out of doors. It really exists then, Charles' spoon; it was not a myth?"

M. Leneil bowed his head in response.

This little piece of tarnished silver evoked in him memories which he believed had been effaced by age and cares. He could see again his first-born in his cradle near the proud, contented young mother; the teaspoon of finely carved silver was a gift from the amiable god-mother, who had died early and was so long regretted. How often he had amused himself watching the plump, rosy babe as it ate, laughing at him all the while! Under this plane-tree, less umbrageous then, he had seen for so many summers, the sunbeams creeping through the foliage to fall upon the faces of his little children, as one by one, being called to the banquet of life, they endeavored to feed themselves as best they could, with the little old spoon, now so battered.

"When one remembers we have all been babies!"

Julia's voice so much resembled her mother's that M. Leneil started and turned toward her.

"You wear nothing but black now," said he scrutinizing her dress. "It has been fully three months since I have seen a bright colored dress."

"It is the fashion," answered Julia, "and papa, you forget my gray dresses."

M. Leneil also remembered that his eldest daughter had also affected sombre colors for some time. A vague suspicion of the truth flashed across his mind, but he did not wish to give it importance, so he closed his eyes as was his habit when he desired to take a nap in his chair.

He opened them again in a few moments and leaned forward abruptly, with his hands on the arms of his chair as if about to rise, and his eyes fixed upon some object in the direction of the Nest.

The little lad dressed in gray with a black sash, who was coming toward him across the lawn, was it Charles; Charles at the age of three, trotting along on his little bare legs? No! it must be one of Aurette's urchins. But they had all grown so much that none of them was so small, and none of them had the elegance of carriage and grace of movement which characterized a child of gentle birth.

The little fellow walked straight to him, and M. Leneil, agitated beyond what he believed possible, watched him, hardly daring to breathe. Julia leaned forward so as to observe her father, and if

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he had turned his head he would have seen his son-in-law just behind him, ready to assist him if it was necessary.

"This little boy," said M. Leneil, shading his eyes with his hand, "is he a new charge of Aurette's?"

The child was now only a few steps from him; somewhat abashed, he hesitated at first, then in a silvery voice which resounded musically in the silence of the garden, he said:

"Grandfather!"

M. Leneil started to rise, but Armand had anticipated him, and in an instant the child found himself upon his grandfather's knee, and enfolded in his arms as tenderly as if he were a fragile, precious crystal; he held his fresh young lips toward the old face, where joy and a kind of anger mingled in a strange fashion.

"Kiss me," said the boy.

For the first time in his life, the grandfather's lips touched those of his grandchild, but he remained doubtful, troubled, looking by turns from his daughter to his son-in-law. Julia resting her hand on her father's arm, showed him the band of crepe which

bordered the little gray blouse. M. Leneil started violently and pressed the child to his heart.

"Charles?" he asked, his whole face changed by a terrible fear.

At this moment Charles appeared at the end of the avenue, leaning on Aurette's arm. Broken down by fever, and the fatigue of the journey, and also by poignant grief, he walked feebly, with weak limbs, and a wildly beating heart.

"There is Charles," said Armand, "it is not he for whom Jean is in mourning—"

"She?" fell from the grandfather's lips, almost in a whisper.

Julia and her husband bowed their heads in assent. M. Leneil placed the child upon the ground, and with extraordinary vigor rose to meet his son.

"My poor boy!" said he, stretching out his arms to him.

Of the two men, the son appeared more weary, and nearer his end; they sat down side by side, with the child between them; then, without knowing how, little Jean found himself again upon his grandfather's knee. He held out his baby hands for the silver spoon.

"Is it for Jean?" said he.

And as Aurette put it in his hand, he drew his aunt to him and kissed her.

"He is a dear little soul," said Charles, looking at him with moist eyes, "he is all gentleness and gayety; he is brave too, for on the journey, although sick and prostrated by the heat, he never uttered a complaint for fear of grieving me, I really believe."

Aurette's eyes met her father's, and she read in them a deep joy, almost fierce, at having a grandchild who was wholly a Leneil.

"He resembles you so greatly," said he to Charles, "that at first I mistook him for you, or rather an apparition of you."

"He does not resemble me so much as he does Aurette," responded Charles, "and it is to her that I have brought him; it was his mother's dying wish that she should have him."

Aurette, without saying a word, took the little one by the hand and led him gently down the paths along the terrace; when they were alone at the spot where she had wept so bitterly in the past she knelt beside him.

"Do you know who I am?" she asked him, entwining her arms around him.

He looked at her an instant with his beautiful brown eyes with their gleam of gold, like those into which he was gazing with so much confidence. The little three-year old brain, subject to the test of a long separation and a journey, which overthrew his whole short life, sought vainly for a clue. He hesitated for a moment, then with the joy of a young dog who finds again his master, he threw his arms around Aurette's neck and exclaimed:

"Mamma!"

She pressed him to her heart, and wept over the chesnut curls which the wind tossed gently; but they were tears of happiness.

CHAPTER XIX.

One year afterward the family was once more united under the old plane-tree. From the nursery windows, now suitably furnished with a bar of iron, floated a superb, red balloon. Jean was making sand pies with the little silver spoon which he had never relinquished from the day he arrived at the Nest. The "seamstress," welcomed by Aurette so long before, was walking about on the lawn with Julia's handsome baby in her arms; the others, happy and idle, had ceased to converse.

At last, Doctor Rozel, rousing himself from the drowsiness of this sweet summer afternoon, said to Aurette:

"We will vegetate here, with nothing to do! Come, Aurette, let us take a little stroll."

They walked for some time in silence under the dense shade of the umbrageous trees, but at last the doctor decided to speak.

"Listen now," said he to his young friend, "for I must make myself clear, and talk candidly. You

are twenty-nine years old, and you were never more beautiful."

"Doctor, I implore you!" said Aurette, covering her ears with her hands.

"Do me the pleasure of listening to me, mademoiselle; I am here to-day for this purpose. You must marry. It is not possible that a charming girl like you can renounce marriage; it would be a crime. I know of an amiable young man who is wasting away for love of you."

"Doctor," replied Aurette, "I have listened to you patiently for a long time; permit me to interrupt you; I do not wish to marry; I will not marry."

"Yes, I knew you would say this to me: You are needed here; it is true, but taking everything into consideration, it could be well arranged."

"It is not that, doctor," said she, looking at him with a gentle expression in her soft eyes. "It is marriage that I fear. Do you wish me to tell you my true feelings? Well, I have suffered once, and I fear to suffer again. I have not the strength to contend with disillusions."

"But," exclaimed the excellent man, "one may marry without illusions; illusions are not necessary to matrimony."

Aurette smiled and laid her hand on her old friend's arm.

"I am a creature made up of illusions," said she. "In the past, I imagined my affianced perfect; I afterward believed that Sidonie would reform; now I believe that my little Jean is the most beautiful, the most intelligent, the most delightful child in the world. And it pleases me to repeat to myself that you are the most adorable old doctor one could ever have for a friend. Ah well, if I married, it would be necessary for me to believe that my husband was absolutely a superior being. Without which, I might perhaps be a good wife, but not a happy one. At present I *am* happy."

"Humph!" said the doctor incredulously.

"I am happy," repeated Aurette with an accent of real sincerity. "My father, my brother, my little Jean, Julia and her child (and I hope she will have others) and her husband, who is an ideal brother-in-law, all this, without mentioning you, makes me an exquisite *entourage*, just to my taste, the like of which I could never find elsewhere. My urchins are growing apace, my flowers are blooming—you know I have taken to gardening again with a frenzy, and it is your fault—my good dog adores me. All

this makes a beautiful frame for my happy life; happy and useful, for they all need me. It suffices me; leave me to the happiness which I have made for myself, and the duties which I have created."

"But," said the doctor, "the children will grow up, your father—"

"Hush! I know it," she replied lowering her voice, "I will then find other duties, other joys."

"Another dog," he added ironically.

"Alas! poor Bruno! yes, in time, another dog; but not for many years, for he is well preserved for his age. But I will find something useful to do which will make me happy. And my garden will always be young and new."

"So you are entirely resolved? My friend is going to be greatly disappointed. He is charming! You know him, it is—"

"Do not tell me his name," said Aurette quickly. "If I know him it would make me ill at ease in his presence, and perhaps he is one of a number of persons whose company I enjoy. Let me keep my innocent pleasure—"

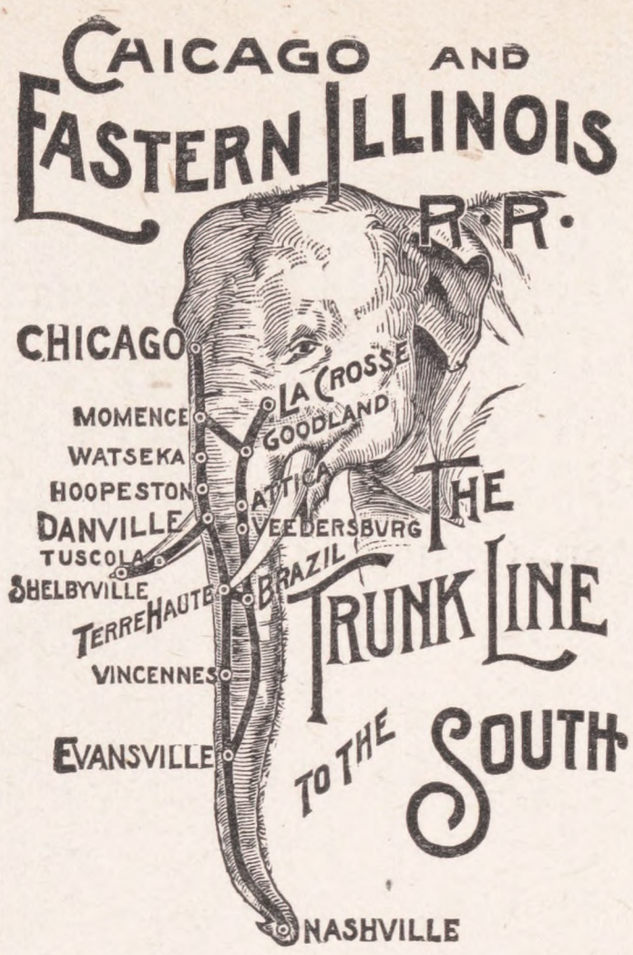
"Mamma Aurette!" cried Jean from a neighboring walk, "come quickly; grandpapa wishes to tell you something!"

"I am coming," replied Aurette, running toward him.

Doctor Rozel watched her until she had disappeared, as young, as light of step as six years ago.

"Such a delightful girl!" he murmured, "is it not vexatious! But who knows, she may yet change her mind."

THE END.



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