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QUEEN of the WOODS

BY
ANDRÉ THEURIET

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LAIRD & LEE, PUBLISHERS
1891

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THE WOODS

BY

ANDRÉ THEURIET

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TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY

HENRIETTA E. MILLER



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QUEEN OF THE WOODS

I

Toward the middle of October, in the beech-nutting season, M. Eustache Destourbet, justice of the peace for Auberive, accompanied by his registrar, Etienne Seurrot, set out for the castle of Vivey. In 1857 there was only one road leading from Auberive to Vivey, and that lay through the forest.

Justice Destourbet, endowed with vigorous limbs, climbed the steep paths nimbly, his tall, spare form enveloped in a brown cloak. M. Seurrot, of a more portly build, followed his companion with difficulty, panting and perspiring. Compassionately from time to time the justice stopped to await his subordinate.

"I hope," said M. Destourbet, as he and M. Seurrot walked side by side "that we shall find

M. Arbillot at the castle for we shall require his services."

The notary will meet us there. He has gone to Praslay to see if M. de Buxieres did not make a deposition to some brother-lawyer. In my humble opinion it is doubtful, for the deceased had great confidence in M. Arbillot and it would seem singular should he have chosen another notary to draw up his last will and testament."

"When the seals are broken," observed the justice, "perhaps we may discover a holographic will in some corner."

"I wish it might be so, sir," replied Seurrot, "for the sake of Claude Sejournant who is a fine fellow."

"And an excellent shot," continued the justice. "I remember him. But had the Great Huntsman,' as he is called by all in the vicinity, a hundred other accomplishments, he would still be at a disadvantage if M. de Buxieres died intestate. In the eyes of the law, as you know, a natural child has no claims."

"M. de Buxieres treated Claudet as his son and

did not conceal the fact that he was his father."

"Possibly—but if the law were to keep account of all the illegitimate offspring, it would have its hands full, especially in this case, for M. Oudart de Buxieres is said to have had more children than one."

"He, he!" acquiesced the registrar with a smile which disclosed his toothless gums, "there may be truth in that. The late lord was possessed with a devil. He could see neither a roe-buck nor a pretty maiden beneath his trees without giving chase! Ah, yes, he had his day! But that does not matter, Claudet was his favorite and M. de Buxieres told me twenty times that he would make him his heir. Therefore I shall be very much astonished if we do not find a will."

"Seurrot, my friend," said the justice phlegmatically, "you have had too much experience not to know that our rustics do not fear anything as much as the drawing-up of a will; for them it is like putting one foot in the grave. They do not summon the priest and the lawyer until

the last moment, and frequently they summon them too late. In this respect the deceased was a rustic and I am very much afraid that he did not put his project into execution."

"It would be a pity if the castle, the lands and all the fortune were to go to an heir whom M. Oudart did not even know, to a Buxieres of the junior branch whom he never saw, not having been on friendly terms with the family."

"A cousin, I believe?" asked the justice.

"Yes, a M. Julien de Buxieres who is in the government employ at Nancy."

"In short he is the only legitimate heir as far as we know. Has he been informed of the fact?"

"Yes, sir. He has even sent power of attorney to M. Arbillot's clerk."

"So much the better," said M. Destourbet, "then we can proceed without delay."

As they thus conversed they traversed the forest and passed out on to the slope which overlooks Vivey. From that spot they could see through the leafless aspen trees, the sinuous gorge of the Aubette at the end of which rose

the village against a background of perpendicular rocks. Two strips of meadow-land extended from each side of the stream to the orchards beyond which rose the dwelling of the Buxieres behind the massive verdure of tall ash trees. This magnificent group of trees and a monumental gate of iron alone justified the name of 'castle' given to a very plain building, the main portion of which was flanked by two towers resembling dove-cotes. This castle had been the property of the Oudart de Buxieres for more than two centuries. Before the Revolution, Christophe de Buxieres, grandfather of the Buxieres just deceased, owned a large part of the forest of Vivey, besides several forges established on the Aube and the Aubette. He had three children, a daughter, an elder son, Claude Antoine, to whom he left all his fortune, and a younger son, Julien Abdon, an officer in the regiment of Rohan-Soubise, with whom he had had a rupture. After serving in Conde's army, the younger Buxieres returned to France about the time of the Restoration. He married, and the government ap-

pointed him "receiver" in a small town in the south. Julien Abdon did not renew his relations with his brother whom he accused of having treated him unjustly. The elder Buxieres had married a Rochetaillee, his only issue being a son, Claude Oudart de Buxieres, whose recent death was the cause of the visit of the justice and his clerk from Auberive.

Claude de Buxieres spent his entire life at Vivey. In addition to a strong constitution and excellent health, he inherited from his father and his grandfather, a love of his native soil, a passionate fondness for the chase and a horror of the constraint and decorum imposed by worldly exigences. Indulged when a child by a weak mother and a preceptor who only succeeded in giving him the most elementary instruction, he very early in life followed his own plan of conduct. Living side by side with peasants and poachers, he had himself become a rustic, wearing a blouse, supping at taverns and talking the mountain patois more readily than French.

The premature death of his father, killed in

the chase by an awkward huntsman, had completely emancipated him at twenty years of age.

From that time he led the life that best suited him—life in the open air without fetters of any kind. None of the stories told of him were exaggerated. Lashed by the fury of his hereditary blood, he never saw a woman without becoming infatuated, and as he was handsome, jovial and generous, he met with very little cruel treatment. Married women, maids, or widows were sought after by him alike. Marriage alone could have curbed him. His reputation naturally made ladies of good breeding shun him, while he himself dreaded the regular monotony of conjugal life. He did not care to bind himself to one bill of fare, preferring, he said, to eat his food now roasted, now boiled, now broiled, according to his fancy and his appetite. When, however, he reached the age of twenty-six, it was remarked that he had become more sedate in his habits.

The chase remained his favorite pastime, but he rarely spent a night away from home and seemed to take more interest in his domestic life.

Some attributed the change to his approaching maturity, others more perspicacious affirmed that the revolution in Claude's habits dated from the appearance of a new servant at the castle. The girl, a native of Aprey, named Manette Sejournant, was not strictly speaking a beauty, but she had magnificent, golden hair, soft, gray eyes and a musical ring in her voice. Well-built, as lithe as a snake, with a very demure air, she served and cared for her master so faithfully, that he was drawn by her influence from the tavern bar-room to the castle-kitchen. She finally gained such an ascendancy over him that he thought her superior to any of his associates. Matters progressed so well that at the end of the first year, Manette disappeared for three months; when she returned she brought with her a baby six weeks old which she represented as the son of a sister who had died, though the child bore a striking resemblance to Claude. M. de Buxieres himself held the child at the baptismal font. Later on he gave him in charge of Abbe Pernot, the priest of Vivey, who prepared Claudet

for his first communion, at the same time instructing him in reading, writing and arithmetic.

When Manette's son was fifteen, Claude put a gun in his hand and took him to the woods. Claudet did his teacher credit and soon became a frequenter of the forest, capable of giving points to all the poachers in the canton. His equal in training a dog could not be found. He knew all the paths in the forests, he pounced upon game with the scent and keenness of a bird of prey and he never failed to hit his mark. He was nevertheless a handsome boy, alert, well-built, with brown hair and an olive complexion like all the Buxieres; he had his mother's soft eyes and yet there was in them a certain wildness at times which reminded one of his father from whom he inherited a passionate temper and a spirit which rebelled at the least opposition. He was a favorite in the neighborhood, and M. de Buxieres, feeling his life renewed in him, was very proud of his cleverness and his handsome appearance. He included him in his pleasure parties, he accorded him a seat at his table, he

voluntarily confided in him his secrets. Claudet naturally considered himself a member of the family. Although he was indeed such, the formality of legal recognition was lacking. Occasionally Manette Sejournant insisted that that form be gone through. To which M. de Buxieres, who disliked intrusting his affairs to a lawyer, invariably replied:

"Do not worry. I have no direct heir, and Claudet will have my entire fortune; my will shall do much better for him than an acknowledgment would."

He talked so frequently and so frankly of his intention of appointing Claudet his sole heir that Manette, unversed in the requirements of the law, looked upon the matter as already settled.

In his sixty-second year Claude de Buxieres died suddenly of apoplexy. Did the will, which was to assure the future of Claudet and to which the deceased had so many times alluded, exist in reality? Neither Manette nor Claudet had been able to ascertain, their hasty search after the death occurred having been brusquely inter-

rupted by the arrival of the mayor of Vivey and by the operations of the justice of the peace who had affixed the seals; so the Sejournalants awaited the return of the justice and his registrar with feverish impatience.

M. Destourbet and Etienne Seurrot pushed open a small gate to the right of the large one, passed beneath the archway of ash trees, whose foliage nipped by the frost was already falling from the branches, and hastily ascending the steps they entered the hall. This large corridor divided the ground floor into two parts—to the right were the dining-room and kitchen, to the left, the drawing-room and billiard-hall. A stone staircase in one of the towers led to the upper stories. Of the four rooms below, the kitchen which the justice and his clerk entered was occupied by guests. Opposite the open door sat M. Arbillot on a stool, lighting his pipe by a brand, while his chief clerk, seated before the table, was making a rough draught of the inventory. In the corner opposite the fire-place, a youth of about four and twenty, who was no other than Claudet,

was playing absently with the silken ears of a spaniel whose head rested on his knees. Behind him Manette Sejournant was putting her shawl and prayer-book into a cupboard.

That morning at church mass had been said for the soul of Claude de Buxieres, and mother and son had donned their Sunday clothes in order to assist at the ceremony.

Claudet seemed ill at ease in his black redingote; keeping his eyes cast down, he replied to the notary's questions in monosyllables and from time to time passed his fingers through his thick brown hair and beard—an indication of preoccupation and ill humor.

As she advanced in years Manette had become so corpulent that the supple outlines whose beauty had delighted Claude de Buxieres, had entirely disappeared. None of her former charms remained but her soft eyes, her abundant golden hair, her white teeth and her coaxing voice.

"Good morning, gentlemen," cried M. Arbillot, "I have been awaiting you impatiently. If agreeable to you we will set to work at once, for at

this season of the year the days draw in quickly."

"As you wish, M. Arbillot," replied the justice, carefully placing his hat on the window-ledge. "We will prepare the official report. Has no will been found yet?"

"None to my knowledge. It is clear to me that the deceased did not make a will—at least not before a notary."

"But," objected M. Destourbet, "he might have drawn one up himself."

"I am certain he did, gentlemen," interrupted Manette in her plaintively, sweet voice; "the poor man did not die without leaving his affairs in order. 'Manette,' said he to me not more than two weeks ago, 'I do not wish you to be worried, neither you nor Claudet, when I am no longer here. All shall be settled to your satisfaction.' I am positive that he put his last wishes on paper. Search carefully, sirs, you will find a will in some drawer."

While she made use of her handkerchief with a great deal of bluster and wiped her eyes, the justice conferred with the notary.

"You undoubtedly agree with me, M. Arbillot, that we should commence our operations by an examination of the furniture in the bed-room?"

The notary bowed and bade his clerk carry his papers to the first-floor.

"Show us the way, Madame," said the justice to the housekeeper, and the four officers of the law followed in the wake of Manette. Claudet, when the men disappeared, advanced several paces, then halted, wavering between the desire to assist in the search and the fear of being considered impudent. The notary, who had returned, noticed his hesitation and said to him:

"Come, Claudet, are you not guardian of the seals?"

In silence they mounted the stairs. Manette, opening noiselessly the door of the deceased's chamber, entered softly as if she were in a church, then she opened the blinds, and the afternoon sun shone upon a room decorated and furnished in the style of the eighteenth century. Not far from the writing-table stood the bed. As soon as the door was closed, the clerk

settled himself at a table with his book and began to read rapidly. From the confusion of words several phrases could be distinguished: "Castle Vivey....deceased the eighth of October last....application of Marie Julien de Buxieres, controller of taxes at Nancy....qualified to style himself heir of Claude Oudart de Buxieres, his second cousin." At the last phrase Claudet made a brusque gesture of surprise.

"The inventory," explained M. Arbillot, "is made at the request of the sole heir to whom must be delivered the possessions of the deceased."

A pause ensued, broken only by a plaintive sigh from Manette, then by the breaking open of the seals on the bureau and the examination of the drawers and sets of pigeon-holes by the justice and his clerk.

Oudart de Buxieres was not much of a scribbler. An almanac, a memorandum-book in which he jotted down the selling price of his sections of forest and the dates of the rents paid by his farmers, a note-book in which he care-

fully kept account of the number of pieces of game shot each day—was all that the bureau contained.

"Let us pass on to another," murmured the justice.

Manette and Claudet remained impassive. They might have known beforehand what the papers found in the drawers contained, for their faces expressed neither surprise nor disappointment.

The search in a chest of drawers led to no better results. They next turned their attention to the secretary, and when, after turning the key twice in the lock, the door slowly opened, the faces of mother and son up to that time impassive, assumed an anxious expression. The clerk searched every drawer scrupulously under the watchful eye of the justice and found papers of merely trifling value—old titles to property, letters, and so forth. As the last drawer was opened, Etienne Seurrot suddenly uttered a significant "Ah," which caused the justice and the notary to prick up their ears, while Manette and

her son started. In the rosewood drawer lay a sheet of paper at the head of which were written these words:

"This is my will."

With a wry face and a shake of his head, the justice communicated to his two companions the substance of the matter which Claude Oudart de Buxieres had transmitted to paper in his bold handwriting. It was as follows:

"Not knowing my next of kin and not caring to know them, I give and bequeath all my estate, movable and immovable—"

The testator had stopped there, either because before continuing he wished to consult some one more experienced than himself, or else having been interrupted he postponed to another day the completion of his last will.

M. Destourbet having read so far, cried anxiously: "M. de Buxieres has not finished; that is too bad!"

"Can it be possible?" exclaimed the housekeeper; "do you think then, sir, that Claudet will inherit nothing?"

"According to my ideas," he replied; "we have here nothing but a scrap of paper with no importance attached to it. The legatee is not named and even had it been, this will would not be valid since it is neither dated nor signed."

"Perhaps M. de Buxieres wrote another?"

"I do not think so. I am almost inclined to believe that he did not have time to complete the arrangements he wished to make, for as proof we find this unfinished document in the only piece of furniture in which he kept his papers."

Then turning to the notary and the clerk, he said:

"You are without doubt, gentlemen, of my opinion; we will therefore defer the breaking of the other seals until the arrival of the legal heir. M. Arbillot, M. Julien de Buxieres must be notified and asked to repair to Vivey as soon as possible."

"I will write this evening," replied the notary.

"In the meantime the care of the seals will be intrusted to Claudet Sejournant."

The justice bowed to Manette who stood at the

foot of the bed, pale and motionless. The registrar and clerk, after having collected their papers, shook hands sympathetically with Claudet.

"I am very sorry," said the notary in his turn, "for what has happened. But if you have no legal, you have moral rights, and I hope that the heir will have a sufficient sense of justice to treat you fairly."

"I shall ask nothing of him!" muttered Claudet between his teeth, and leaving his mother to accompany the officers of the law to the door, he retired to his room—next to that of the deceased—laid aside his redingote, put on a hunting-jacket, gaiters, and an old felt hat and descended to the kitchen where he found Manette crouching over the embers, her head between her hands, weeping. Since she had become mistress of M. de Buxieres' establishment, she had endeavored to be more refined in her speech, and only spoke French, but in that moment of despair the rude dialect of her native province rushed to her lips and she railed against her dead lord.

"The miserable man! I told him often enough

he would leave us in want! Where will we now obtain food? We shall have to beg from door to door."

"Nonsense, mother," interrupted Claudet sharply; then placing his hand upon her shoulder, he said: "Calm yourself! As long as I have the use of my hands, we shall never become beggars! I am going out now—I need the air!"

He crossed the gardens to the outskirts of the woods. The sky, which all morning had been obscured, was clearing; the rays of the sun burst through the mist lighting now the fields, now the forest glades; that fitful illumination gave to the landscape a spring-like splendor; the songs of the robin-redbreast and the tiny pink flowers dotted over the meadows aided the illusion. Those parts remaining in shadow had a no less brilliant coloring—there was the brownish purple hue of the wild pear trees, the ruddy glow of the cherry trees and the pale yellow of the sycamores. Over this landscape lay the calmness of solitude, of religious meditation. The forest of old trees seemed to sleep, and the rustling of the breezes

through their branches resembled unconscious sighs breathed in dreams. Even the peculiar, autumnal odors were in subtle harmony with the surroundings.

At times voices could be heard in the distance, and among the brushwood the sound of branches beaten down by invisible hands. The women were gathering beech-nuts. When the fruit of the trees was abundant, the gathering of nuts brought into the woods all the women and children who collected those triangular seeds from which excellent oil could be extracted.

As he walked slowly along, Claudet suddenly came upon large white cloths spread at the foot of the trees and upon their snowy whiteness, brown heaps of gathered nuts. Occasionally he heard a familiar voice, but as he did not feel disposed to talk, he hastily fled into the underwood to avoid the intruders. The event so little anticipated which was to change his entire life, was of such recent date that he could not face it calmly. He felt as if he had received a blow and had been stunned. He had not yet been able

to reconcile himself to the stern reality. He surprised himself, vaguely hoping that all could be arranged. With bowed head, his hands in his pockets, he passed into an old forest road in which the grass had grown thickly among the stones, and in the distance through the scant foliage of the interlaced boughs, he saw the outlines of a feminine form.

Clad in a gray woolen skirt and a bodice of the same material, her arms bared to the elbows and raised to steady a sack full of nuts she was carrying upon her head, the young girl advanced toward him with an elastic, rhythmical step. The manner in which she carried her burden displayed the suppleness of her form, the graceful curves of her bosom and her throat; she was not very tall, but she was well proportioned. As she approached, an oblique ray of the setting sun gilded the masses of her hair. Claudet aroused from his reverie by the sound of footsteps, recognized the daughter of M. Vincart, the owner of La Thuiliere. Just as he raised his head, the young girl, no doubt fatigued by the weight of her

burden, rested it upon the ground and stopped to take breath. In a trice, Claudet was beside her.

"Good evening, Reine," said he gently; "will you allow me to assist you."

"Good evening, Claudet," she replied. "I cannot refuse so kind an offer. The sack was heavier than I thought it would be."

"Have you gone far like this?"

"No; our people are nutting in the woods; I am returning home because I do not like to leave my father alone any longer, and I thought I would carry back with me what I had gathered."

"You cannot be reproached for shirking work, Reine, nor for fearing to put your hand to any kind! To see you working about the farm all day, one would never suspect that you had been to school in the city like any lady."

Claudet's face lighted up with naive and tender admiration. His eyes evidently rested with pleasure upon Reine's limpid, black ones—on her pure, fresh lips.

"What can I do?" she asked with a smile; "it

is a matter of necessity. If there is no man in a house to take the lead the women must do so. After mamma's death, my father's health failed, and since his illness he has grown entirely helpless, so I take his place."

While she was talking, Claudet seized the sack of nuts, and raising it as if it were a feather, he placed it on his shoulder. They walked toward La Thuiliere together. The sun had set; a penetrating dampness, rising from the ground, enveloped them in a bluish fog.

"Is your father always ill?" asked Claudet, after a pause.

"He never leaves his easy-chair; his mind has weakened, and I have to amuse him like a child. But, how are you, Claudet?" she asked suddenly turning her bright eyes upon him. "You have had your share of trouble. Great events have taken place since we last met. Poor M. de Buxieres was taken away very suddenly!"

The relations which bound Claudet to the deceased were a secret to no one. Reine, as well as all the country people knew of and recognized

them, irregular as they were, as a sanctioned fact.

Claudet's features, which for a moment had relaxed, contracted.

"Yes," he sighed, "he died very suddenly."

"And now, Claudet, you are master at the castle?"

"Neither master nor man," he returned with so bitter an accent that the maiden gazed at him in astonishment.

"What!" she exclaimed, "was it not understood that you should inherit M. de Buxieres' entire estate?"

"That was his intention, but he had not time to carry it out. He died intestate, and I am as nothing in the eyes of the law; the fortune will pass to a distant relative, to a Buxieres whom M. Oudart did not even know."

Reine's black eyes filled with tears.

"What a misfortune!" she cried. "Who would have expected that? Oh, my poor Claudet!"

She uttered those words with such sincere compassion that Claudet was undoubtedly misled, for

he thought he read in her tearful eyes something more tender than pity. He started, seized her hand and pressed it tightly.

"Thank you, Reine! Yes," he added, after a pause, "it is a hard blow to awaken one fine morning and find oneself penniless and homeless when one has been accustomed to living upon one's income."

"What do you intend to do?" asked Reine gravely.

Claudet shrugged his shoulders.

"Work to earn my bread. If I can find no work here I will enlist. I do not think I would make a poor soldier! But those thoughts are as yet a confused mass in my brain. First of all, I must attend to my mother who is disconsolate."

"Claudet," said the girl, "I know you are very proud, very sensitive, and I do not wish to hurt your feelings, therefore do not take in bad part what I am about to say to you. If you are ever in trouble, you will remember, I know, that you have friends at La Thuiliere and you will seek them."

Claudet colored.

"I could not take offense at anything that you said, Reine," he stammered, "for I know how kind you are; I recognized your generous qualities in the days when we played in the priest's garden! But there is no hurry; the heir will not arrive for several weeks and by that time I hope we shall have found some means of helping ourselves."

They had reached the fields belonging to La Thuiliere. By the fading light of day they could distinguish the dark outlines of an old forge, now a grange, and they saw a twinkling light in one of the low windows.

"You are now at home," said Claudet, placing the sack of nuts on the stone fence which inclosed the premises. "Good night."

"Will you not come in and warm yourself?"

"No, I must return," he replied.

"Then farewell, Claudet; be of good cheer!"

He glanced at her a moment in the twilight, then abruptly grasping her hand, he murmured huskily:

“Thank you, Reine, you are a good girl; I love you very much!” After which words he walked rapidly away and again turned into the woods.

II

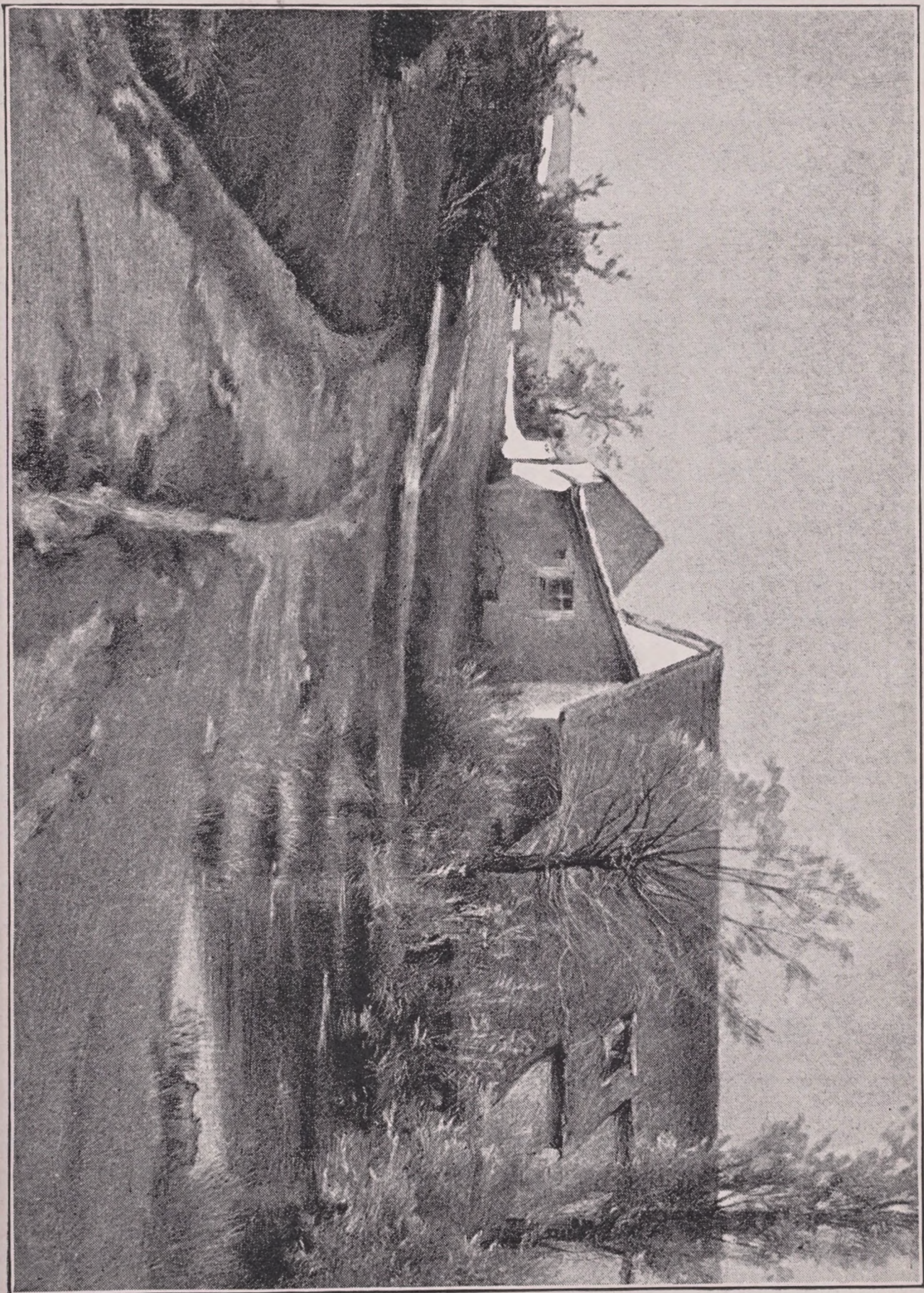
While matters were progressing thus at Vivey, he whose name furnished the subject for gossip and curiosity to the villagers M. Julien de Buxieres, seated in his modest room in the Faubourg Saint-Jean at Nancy, was more astonished by the later news received from the lawyer of Auberive than he was on the receipt of the first announcement. It is true he remembered having heard his father speak of a cousin who had never married and who was possessed of vast estates in Haute-Marne; but as all relations had ceased for so long a time between the two families, M. de Buxieres senior rarely mentioned his expectations which seemed so unlikely ever to be realized. Julien had never counted on that chimerical inheritance, and he received the intelligence of Claude Oudart de Buxieres' death indifferently. He was, of course, by right, the lawful heir to the castle of Vivey, but it was highly probable

that Claude de Buxieres had made a will in favor of some one else.

The second dispatch from notary Arbillot announcing that the deceased had died intestate and requiring the legal heir to repair as soon as possible to Vivey, put an end to the young man's doubts, which gave place to a sensation of stupefaction.

Julien de Buxieres up to this time had not been in affluent circumstances. His parents had left him no patrimony; he lived upon his limited salary as controller of taxes. He was twenty-seven years of age, of medium height, slender, pale, nervous and sensitive. His features were delicate, his brow intelligent, his eyes blue, his mouth, shaded by a brown mustache, bearing the imprint of melancholy and premature mental weariness.

There are men who have never had any childhood, or rather, whose childhood has known no happiness; Julien was one of those. That which gives to childhood its charm and its joy is the tender and warm atmosphere of the paternal home



—the caresses of a mother, familiar and sweet intimacy with one's native country in which one's eyes are gradually opened to the marvelous sights of the outer world, when each street corner, each tree, each spot of earth has a story to tell.

Julien had known no such life. The son of an official removed from place to place at the instance of the administration, he had never, so to speak, had a native land nor domestic hearth. Born in a small town in the Pyrenees, he was taken when two years old to the town of Artois; at the expiration of another two years, his parents moved again; thus his childhood was spent in the east, west, north and south. He had nothing but unpleasant recollections of those hasty changes of abode and of long journeys in diligences.

His mother died when he was barely eight years of age; his father, engrossed in his duties and not caring to leave his child in the hands of servants, placed him at an early age in a college under clerical supervision. There Julien spent

the remainder of his childhood and his youth, submitting to the discipline which, though not severe, was on the whole quite rigid. Nature he only saw in the monotonous walks through a flat country. During vacation he rejoined his father and found him almost every time in another place. He felt more than ever like a stranger among strangers and it was with secret satisfaction that he again sought the cloisters of the College of Saint Hilaire and placed himself under the yoke of the paternal but inflexible ecclesiastical discipline

He accepted with blind faith the religious and moral teachings of the reverend fathers. Women inspired him with secret aversion. The beauties of nature did not move him. The blossoming of flowers in spring, the splendor of the summer sun, the rich colors of autumn were not associated in his mind with any joyful emotion; he professed indifference to those purely material sights which he considered dangerous and disturbing.

His mind delighted in a mystical idealism.

He was pronounced a "bear," when at eighteen he left the college, and his father, aware of his peculiar tastes, tried to introduce him into the official society in which he moved. After his father's death he resumed his stay-at-home habits; he returned with a sigh of relief to his solitude, his books and his meditations. Thus he had attained his twenty-seventh year when the intelligence of the death of Claude de Buxieres was received, together with the announcement of the unexpected inheritance which had devolved upon him. After a correspondence with M. Arbillot, which assured him as to the validity of his rights, he obtained leave of absence and set out for Haute-Marne.

On the way he wondered very much at that providential windfall which would permit him to give up a career for which he felt unfitted, to live independently according to his tastes, free from all material care. The notary estimated Claude de Buxieres' personal estate at two hundred thousand francs. That was much more than Julien de Buxieres had ever dared to dream of.

He was enchanted with the prospect of a solitary retreat in a castle situated in the heart of the woods, where he could give himself up to the life of study and thought which he loved—far from worldly frivolities and demands. He fancied himself already at Vivey, in a library filled with books of his own careful choosing.

Julien arrived at Langres on a foggy October afternoon and immediately inquired at the hotel if a carriage could be procured to take him that same night to Vivey. The proprietor refused to let his horse go out until the following morning, owing to the miserable condition of the roads. Julien was vainly attempting to reason with the man, when he was accosted by a cabman who had overheard their conversation, and who offered to undertake the journey for twenty francs.

"I have a capital horse," said he to Julien, "I know the roads and I promise you that we shall be at Vivey before night draws in."

The bargain was quickly made. Half an hour later Julien de Buxieres was on his way to his final destination. For the first time since he left

Nancy he experienced a feeling of joy and peace, his tongue became loosened and he addressed the coachman who smoked as he spurred on his horses.

"Are we very far from Vivey?"

"That is a matter of opinion, sir! As the crow flies it is not very far, and if the roads were good we should be there in an hour. Unfortunately at the turning by the farm at Allofray, we shall have to leave the main for a cross road, then we shall wade through mud and—"

"You told me you knew the roads!"

"I know them without knowing them. With those cross-roads one can never be sure of anything; they change every year."

"How long is it since you were at Vivey?"

"Five or six years ago. I often took huntsmen to the castle. Ah, the hunting grounds are beautiful, sir; one cannot go twenty paces without seeing a stag or a roebuck."

"Did you ever see M. Oudart de Buxieres?"

"Yes, sir, more than once. He is a jolly fellow and a bold one."

"He *was*," interrupted Julien, gravely, "for he is dead."

"Ah, excuse me. I did not know. Is he dead? Such a fine man! Be careful," he added, pulling the reins, "we are leaving the road and must keep our eyes open."

It was twilight; the guide lighted his lamps and the cab jolted along a road now stony, now muddy; suddenly the wheels sank into a rut and the horse could not proceed. At first the coachman swore roundly, then he asked Julien to help him push the wheels; but the young man, whose muscles had been little exercised, could not render him much assistance.

"It is impossible to move them," he yelled.

"Let the wheel alone, sir; you have no more strength than a chicken! But we cannot spend the night here!"

"If we were to call," suggested Julien, "perhaps some one might come to our aid."

They whistled loudly, and at the end of five minutes a voice replied. A wood-cutter coming from a section near by had heard them.

"Come here," cried the coachman; "we are stuck in the mud. Lend us a hand."

The wood-cutter finally appeared and examined the cab with a shake of his head.

"You are on the wrong road," said he, "and you will have a great deal of trouble in getting out of it. Your best plan would be to unharness the horse and to wait until daylight to extricate your carriage."

"And where shall we sleep?" grumbled the cabman. "There is not a single house in this wretched part of the country."

"Pardon me, you are not far from La Thuiliere; the people at the farm will not refuse to give you lodging, and to-morrow morning they will help you with your carriage. Take out the horse, comrade; I will conduct you to the spot from which you can see the lights at the farm-house."

The coachman with many oaths followed that counsel; they took out the horse, detached one of the lamps from the cab to serve as a lantern, and under the escort of the wood-cutter they slowly penetrated the mist.

In the course of ten minutes the wood-cutter pointed out to the two travelers a light which glimmered at the end of a country-road.

"You need only go straight ahead," said he, "the barking of the dogs will guide you. Ask for Mlle. Vincart—good night, sirs!"

The coachman walked in advance with his lantern; young Buxieres followed him. Finally they heard furious barking.

"We are there," said the man. "Fortunately the dogs are not unloosed or it would fare badly with us!"

They entered an open gate and from the courtyard examined the dwelling. With the exception of a light seen through one of the windows on the ground floor, the long, low facade was in darkness. To the barking of the watch-dogs was joined the bleating of sheep, the neighing of horses and the clattering of the farm-servants' wooden shoes. At the same moment the door of the house opened and a servant, attracted no doubt by all that uproar, appeared on the threshold, lantern in her hand.

"Holla, you," cried she sharply to the newcomers, who were advancing toward her. "What do you want?"

In a few words the coachman related their misadventure and asked if they could be sheltered at the farm over night; on the following morning he and the gentleman, whom he was conducting to Vivey, would set out again.

The servant raised the lantern and prudently scanned the faces of her two interlocutors; no doubt their appearance reassured her, for in a more gentle tone, she said:

"Faith, that does not depend on me. I am not the mistress here, but come along. Mlle. Reine will answer you herself."

After the driver had fastened his horse to a post, the servant ushered them into a large room paved with brick, and placed two chairs before the fire.

"Warm yourselves while you wait," she continued; "I will not be long. Excuse me, I am going to milk my cows. It is work that must be done."

When the door had closed behind her, Julien de Buxieres glanced curiously around the room into which they had been conducted; it served as kitchen and dining-room. To the right of the fire-place, a large cast-iron stove was roaring, while saucepans standing upon it emitted savory odors. In the center of the room on a table of beechwood was spread a cloth of coarse linen, and covers were laid for a meal. White muslin curtains shaded the windows on the ledges of which were pots of white, brown and pink chrysanthemums. Around the walls were shelves containing in symmetrical order shining cooking utensils, pans and copper kettles. Near the clock a cupboard displayed to view a service of old Aprey pottery in bright, gay colors; not far from the mantel-piece, adorned with a copper crucifix, shelves affixed to the walls contained three rows of books bound in gray cloth. Julien read their titles in surprise; they were: Paul and Virginia, La Fontaine's Fables, Gessner's Idyls, Don Quixote, and odd volumes of the Pictorial Magazine.

"It is very comfortable here," said the coachman; "an odor issues from that stove which produces hunger; I should like to see Mlle. Reine."

Scarcely had he completed his sentence when a shrill voice which seemed to come from the copper kettles, repeated "Reine! Reine!"

"What is that?" exclaimed the coachman in perplexity. Both men raised their eyes toward the beams. At that moment they heard the rustling of wings, a light hopping, and saw a black and white magpie on one of the joists.

"Ha, ha!" laughed the coachman.

He was still laughing, when a plaintive echo, another voice—this time human—proceeded from a dark corner and stammered: "Rei eine! Rei eine!"

"Hey!" muttered Julien starting up; "some one replied."

His companion seized the lamp and advanced towards that portion of the room which was in shadow. Suddenly he stopped short. Julien, who had followed him, saw with affright, at the

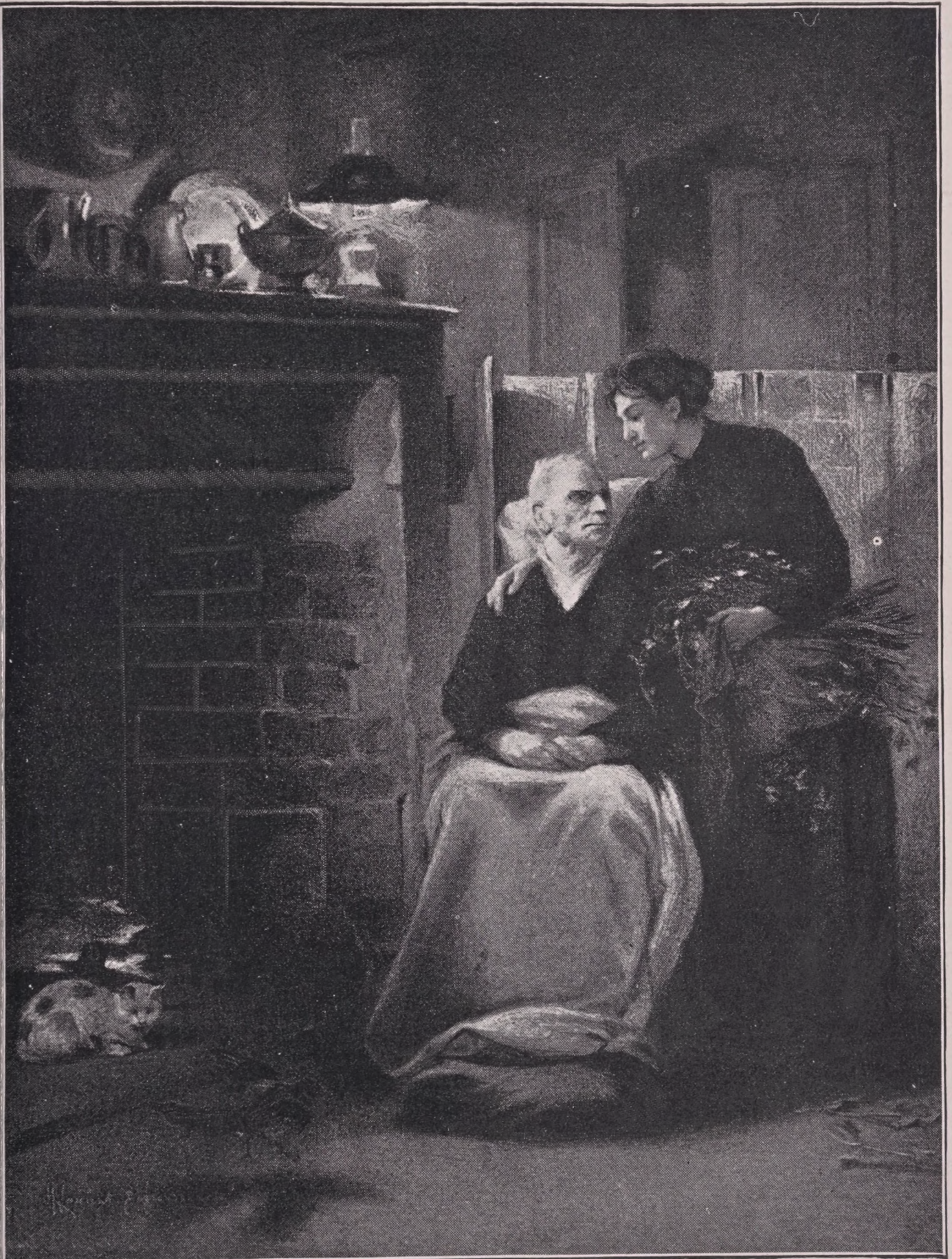
end of a sort of niche formed by two screens, a strange-looking personage stretched upon a lounge and almost buried beneath woolen covers. This person's long white hair made his bloodless, emaciated face appear more ghastly, while his eyes were wide and staring. - He did not stir, and his arms hung inertly by his side.

"Sir," said Julien, greeting him ceremoniously, "we regret having disturbed you. Your servant ushered us into this room to await the arrival of Mlle. Reine."

The inanimate old man did not seem to understand, but continued to repeat in the same tone: "Rei-eine—Rei-eine!"

The two astonished travelers gazed at this sepulchral looking creature, then at one another, and began to feel ill at ease. The magpie clapped his wings and cried in his turn: "Reine! Reine des bois!"

"I am here, papa, do not worry!" said a sweet, musical voice behind them. Reine Vincart had entered the room. Her head was enveloped in a white hood, against her bosom she pressed an



enormous bouquet which seemed to contain specimens of all the wild fruits of the forest.

Julien de Buxieres and his companion turned at the sound of Reine's voice. When the latter perceived them, she approached them and asked quickly:

"What are you doing here? do you not see that you have frightened him?"

Julien abashed and mortified, murmured an apology, and in his confusion attempted to explain the accident he and his guide had met with. She interrupted him with:

"Yes, the carriage; Margaret told me of it; it shall be attended to. Take seats nearer the fire, gentlemen, we will soon talk the matter over."

She took the lamp from the guide and placed it, together with her armful of plants, upon a table near by. In a trice she removed her hood and shawl, then she knelt beside the invalid after having kissed his brow affectionately. From his corner by the fire-place, Julien heard her talking in a coaxing manner to the paralytic.

"I know you were lonesome, papa," said she, "but

you know, I did not wish to return until the last sacks of potatoes were placed in the cart. Now everything has been brought in, and we can rest content. I thought of you on the way and I brought you a lovely bouquet. We will enjoy examining them together to-morrow, by daylight. Now you will drink your broth, and when we have supped Margaret and I will tuck you snugly in bed and I will sing you to sleep."

She rose, took from a cupboard a bowl which she filled with the contents simmering in a vessel on the stove, and returned to the old man's side. Slowly she administered the food to him. Julien, notwithstanding the gloom which the misadventures of that evening had cast over him, could not help admiring the patient, maternal tenderness with which the young girl cared for her father.

When the bowl was empty she returned to the stove, seeming to have just remembered her guests.

"Excuse me, sir," she began, addressing Julien, "but I had to wait upon my father first. Did I

understand Margaret to say that you were going to Vivey?"

"Yes, mademoiselle, I hope to sleep there to-night."

"You have come, no doubt," she continued, "on business at the castle. Will not M. Oudart's heir arrive soon?"

"I am the heir," said Julien, coloring.

"Are you M. de Buxieres?" exclaimed Reine in surprise. Somewhat embarrassed at having allowed her astonishment to be perceived, she paused and blushed in her turn. She would never have dreamed that that timid, delicate, melancholy-looking man was the new lord—he resembled the Oudart de Buxieres so little!

"Pardon me, sir," she continued; "you may have thought my welcome somewhat rude, but my first thoughts were of my father. He is very ill as you probably have seen, and I feared he might have been startled by the sight of strange faces."

"It is I, mademoiselle," replied Julien in confusion, "who should ask pardon for having caused so much inconvenience. But I will not trouble

you any longer. If you will give us a guide who will start us on the road to Vivey, we can sleep at the castle this evening."

"No, indeed," protested Reine with great cordiality; "you are my guests and I cannot permit you to leave us in this manner. Moreover, you would probably find the house closed down there, for I do not think they expected you so soon."

During that conversation, the servant who had admitted the travelers entered the room; behind her came the farm-servants, men and women who silently seated themselves at the table.

"Margaret," said Reine, "lay two more covers. Has the gentleman's horse been cared for?"

"Yes, mademoiselle, he is in the stable," replied one of the men.

"Very well, Bernard take Fleuriot to-morrow and fetch the carriage which is imbedded in the mud at Planche au Vacher. Now, M. de Buxieres, will you and your guide take seats at the table? I do not know if our supper will be to your taste; I have nothing to offer you but broth, a chine of pork and some cheese. But you must

be hungry, and if one's appetite is good it is not a difficult matter to eat."

Margaret served the soup, and soon nothing could be heard but the clatter of dishes, knives and forks. Julien glanced stealthily at the handsome maiden presiding at the table and watching every detail of the meal; he thought her odd. According to his theories, woman, and above all a young woman, should be modest, submissive with eyes downcast, only raising them to consult her husband or her mother as to what she might and might not do. But Reine was entirely different. She appeared to be scarcely twenty-two years old, yet she acted with the promptness and decision of a man, while preserving the reserve, the affection and the easy grace of a woman. What surprised Julien too was the fact that she seemed to have received an education superior to that of the people of her class, and he wondered how that refined woman could accommodate herself to the coarse atmosphere in which she lived. While Julien reflected and ate his food with an absent air, Reine Vincart hastily

glanced at the reserved, shy man who scarcely dared address her, and who conducted himself so stiffly and ceremoniously. She mentally compared him with Claudet, the bold huntsman, resolute, full of life and energy, and within her breast was awakened a feeling of compassion at the thought of the reception which the Sejournalants would give to that master, so timid, so unfamiliar with the customs and manners of rustics. Julien did not seem to her capable of defending himself against the ill-will of people who would consider him an interloper, and who would certainly endeavor to make him pay dearly for the inheritance of which he had deprived them.

"Do you not drink, M. de Buxieres?" Reine asked, observing that her guest's glass was still full.

"No, I do not drink very much," he replied, "and I never drink wine clear. I would be obliged if you would pass me some water."

Reine smiled and handing him a jug said: "Indeed! We here in the mountains have an especial weakness for Burgundy. Of course you hunt."

"No, mademoiselle, I do not know how to handle a gun."

"Then you do not intend to settle at Vivey?"

"Why not?" he exclaimed. "On the contrary, I intend to live at the castle—in fact to make it my permanent home."

Reine replied with a smile:

"You are neither a huntsman nor a lover of wine, and you intend to live in our woods! You will die of ennui, my poor sir!"

"I shall have my books for companions," said he. "Moreover, solitude has never frightened me."

The young girl shook her head doubtfully.

"I'll wager," she continued, "that you do not even play cards."

"Never; games of chance are contrary to my principles."

"Remember, that I do not censure you for it," she answered gayly, "but if I may make so bold as to give you a piece of advice, do not mention your repugnance to hunting, cards and wine; our peasants would pity you and that would detract from your dignity."

Julien looked at her in amazement. She ceased talking with M. de Buxieres in order to give instructions to Margaret with regard to the beds set apart for her guests, then in silence the meal was finished. Reine Vincart arose from the table.

"This is the time that I assist my father to retire. I shall have to leave you, M. de Buxieres; Margaret will conduct you to your room. Pleasant dreams." She returned to her father's side. At the sight of her, the paralytic manifested his joy by a succession of inarticulated sounds.

The room on the first floor, to which Margaret led Julien, looked bright and inviting. The walls were white-washed, the chairs, table and lounge were of polished oak; a fire crackled in the grate and through the blinds could be seen a glimmer of the moon. The young man prepared for bed at once, but notwithstanding the fatigue of the day, sleep had forsaken him. Through the partition he could hear the musical voice of Reine, who was trying to lull her father to sleep

by singing to him a national air, and, as Julien turned upon his pillow again and again, he recalled the image of the original girl whose grace, energy, and freedom of speech attracted, while they scandalized him. Finally he fell asleep.

When he awoke, the sun had risen. The sky had cleared during the night. The leaves touched by the first frost fell upon the ground and formed green heaps at the bases of the trees.

Julien clothed himself hastily and descended to the court-yard where he saw the cab in which he had ridden the preceding day—one of the farm-hands was cleaning its muddy wheels. On entering the large hall on the ground floor, he found Reine Vincart there.

Good morning, M. de Buxieres," she said in her cordial manner. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes."

"That is well! You have surprised me at work. My father is still in bed and I am profiting by his absence to arrange his little nook. The doctor has ordered that he should not lie near the fire, so I installed him here. It has

agreed with him very well; in order to guard him from all draughts I contrived this niche."

She pointed out to him, by the side of the window, a large chair ensconced amid the screens. She noticed that Julien gazed curiously at the rough pictures pasted on their sides.

"That was my invention, too. My father's mind is somewhat weakened, but he understands a great many things, though he cannot speak. As he grows very weary all day long lying in his chair, I covered the screens with those pictures. The bright colors amuse him as they would a child, and I explain their meaning to him. I do not tell him much at one time for fear of fatiguing him. We are now taking Pyramus and Thisbe, and it will take us a long time before we reach the end."

Her guest cast upon her a compassionate glance which seemed to say: "The poor man will not last long enough to learn the end!"

No doubt she entertained the same fears, for there was a suspicion of tears in her dark eyes; she sighed, and for a moment did not speak.

During that pause the magpie hopped familiarly around her mistress, repeating: "Reine, Reine des Bois," (Queen of the woods.)

"Why does the bird call you 'Reine des Bois?'" asked Julien.

"Ah," replied the girl, "it is a name given to me by the people of this vicinity, because I love the woods so dearly. I spend as much time as I can in our forests. Margaret remembers hearing my father call me by that name in days gone by."

"Do you like this wild country?" again inquired M. de Buxieres.

"Very much. I was born here and I love it.

"But you have not always lived here?"

"No; my mother, who was from a city, sent me to school at Dijon. I was educated like a lady, though you would not think so. I remained there six years. When my mother died my father was taken ill, and I returned home."

"Was not that sudden change a trial to you?"

"Not at all. You see, I am at heart a rustic. But," she added, turning towards the fire-place,

"I believe they are harnessing the horse and you must be hungry. Your guide has already been supplied with some roast meat and white wine. I will not offer you the same food; I will prepare you some coffee."

She waited upon him herself. He hastily swallowed a cup of coffee and turning toward his hostess, said:

"It only remains for me, mademoiselle, to thank you for your kind hospitality. I look upon this cordial welcome on my arrival in a strange part of the country, as a good omen. Permit me to ask you one more question," he continued, looking at her with an anxious air, "why do you think I will have difficulty in becoming accustomed to the life here?"

"Why?" she repeated, shaking her head, "because to speak candidly, you do not impress me, sir, as being the least rural in your habits. You are not familiar with our customs; you cannot address the peasants in their tongue and they will not understand you. You will be to them the 'gentleman from the city,' whom they mistrust.

I may be mistaken, but I fancy you will meet with difficulties of which you do not seem to think—”

She was interrupted by the entrance of the guide who had grown impatient. The horse was in readiness and all was awaiting M. de Buxieres. Julien, after awkwardly slipping a piece of silver into Margaret's hand, bade farewell to Reine Vincart who accompanied him to the door.

“Thank you again, mademoiselle,” he murmured, ‘and good-bye until we meet again, since we are to be such near neighbors.”

She pressed the hand he timidly offered her. Julien mounted the box beside the coachman.

“A safe journey and good luck, sir!” cried Reine, as the cab rumbled along.

III

Upon leaving La Thuiliere the coachman again turned his horse toward the Planche au Vacher.

Directed that time by the people at the farm, he followed a road which rudely jostled the two travelers, but which led to a point at which they could ford the stream.

When they reached the opposite shore, the white mist which had enveloped them, cleared off somewhat, and they could see the road distinctly.

"Now I know where I am!" exclaimed the guide. "We have only to go straight ahead and in twenty minutes we shall be at Vivey. That miserable fog penetrates to one's very bones! With your permission, M. de Buxieres, I will light my pipe in order to warm myself."

Having discovered that his fare was the owner of the castle, he regretted his gruff treatment of him on the preceding day and tried to make

amends by an incessant stream of talk; but Julien de Buxieres, occupied with his thoughts and interested in the new surroundings, paid little heed to the man's advances. The pleasant remembrance of Reine Vincart's hospitality, no doubt predisposed Julien to enjoy the charming morning, and, for the first time, he drank in the beauties of the woodland scenery.

Soon they perceived a park in the distance, surrounded by low, crumbling walls, then several smoking chimneys and beyond a group of ash trees, two towers. The coachman pointed to them with the end of his whip and said:

"That is Vivey. These are your lands, M. de Buxieres!"

Julien started. Notwithstanding his indifference to worldly comforts, he could not restrain a certain sense of satisfaction as he thought that he was to be the master of those woods, those fields and that old dwelling. His satisfaction was in some measure detracted from, by the thought of the material details of assuming possession. For Julien was not a business man and

Reine Vincart's predictions worried him. When the cab drew up at a gate and he saw the avenue of ash trees, the grassy court and the facade, his heart throbbed violently.

"The gate is closed; it does not look as if they expected you," said the coachman.

They alighted from the carriage. The cabman pulled the bell. The noise aroused the dogs, causing them to bark furiously; but no one within the house seemed to hear it.

"Bah, we must get in," said the man, ringing again and glancing slyly at his companion's disconcerted face. He fastened his horse to one of the posts, then pushing open the gate, they passed beneath the ash trees, while the dogs renewed their barking.

As they reached the court, the house-door opened and Manette Sejourant appeared on the steps.

"Good morning, sirs," she cried in a drawling tone; "was it you who made all that noise?"

The sight of that corpulent woman increased Julien's confusion. He advanced awkwardly,



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raised his hat, and replied almost apologetically:

"Pardon, mademoiselle; I am the late Claude de Buxieres' cousin and heir. I have come to live at the castle, and I wrote M. Arbillot, the notary, to that effect. I am surprised that he has not notified you."

"Ah, are you M. Julien de Buxieres?" exclaimed Mme. Sejournant, staring at the stranger with an expression of curiosity mingled with disdainful surprise which succeeded in putting the young man out of countenance. "M. Arbillot was here yesterday; he waited for you all day, and as you did not come, he left last night."

"Were you in my cousin's service?" gently inquired Julien, who wished to treat his relative's servants considerately and kindly.

"Yes, sir," replied Manette, with mournful dignity. "I served M. de Buxieres for twenty-six years, faithfully. But I have only remained here since his death, with Claudet, my son, to keep the seals. We have grown tired of living with others and we have decided to leave as soon as the notary no longer needs us."

"I am sorry, madame," murmured Julien, nervously adding: "There must be other servants here. Will you kindly see that our carriage is brought into the yard? And now, if you will show us the way we will enter the house, for I am anxious to be at home, and my guide would not object to some refreshment."

"I will send some one to open the gate," said the housekeeper. "If you will come in, sirs, I will conduct you to the only room available at present, on account of the seals not having been removed." Leading the way, she proceeded toward the kitchen and stood aside to allow them to enter the large room in which, before a bright fire, a servant was preparing coffee.

"My boy," said Manette with a sly wink at her son, "here is M. de Buxieres who has come to take possession of his property."

Claudet bowed in silence, then the two young men glanced at one another hastily.

Julien de Buxieres' embarrassment was augmented by the unexpected presence of the handsome rustic with the strong, intelligent face and ro-

bust form, and by the surprised, ironically compassionate glance cast upon him from Claudet's large brown eyes. He turned uneasily and asked that some wine be given his guide.

While Manette executed his commands and brought a glass and a bottle of wine, Claudet continued to stare with a sort of stupid incredulity at Claude de Buxieres' heir, who looked more like a seminarist than a scion of that noble family. Claudet therefore ventured to question him who had come to deprive him of his possessions.

"Are you really M. Julien de Buxieres?" he asked suspiciously.

"Do you take me for an impostor?" exclaimed the young man with a blush.

"I did not say so," sullenly replied Claudet, "but you surely have not your name written on your face and—my faith, as custodian of the seals, I have a certain responsibility! I shall have to post myself, that is all!"

Irritated at having to submit to an examination in the presence of the coachman who had brought

him from Langres, Julien asked in a tone of haughty irony:

"Would you like me to show you my papers?"

Anticipating that matters might become serious, Manette interposed.

"Claudet, let the gentleman alone. He would not be here, if he had not the right. As for asking him to prove his identity, that is not our business but the justice's and lawyer's. You would do better, my boy, to go to Auberive and ask those gentlemen to come hither to-morrow."

At that moment, the boy who had been sent to open the gate, entered the kitchen.

"The carriage is in the court," said he, "and the gentleman's luggage is in the hall. Where shall I put it, Madame Sejournant?"

Julien's eyes turned from Manette to the peasant with an expression of fatigue and impatience.

"My faith," said Manette, "there is only the deceased's room that is open! Will monsieur use that?"

"Yes," murmured Julien de Buxieres; "have

my trunks taken to that room and give orders that it be aired immediately."

At a sign from the housekeeper, the boy and the maid-servant disappeared again.

"Madame," continued Julien, turning toward Manette, "did I understand that I cannot count upon you to keep house for me? Can you at least get me a woman who will take your place?"

"Oh, as far as that is concerned," said the housekeeper, "a day or two more or less, makes no difference. I am not so particular. I will keep the house in order as long as I am here. At what hour would you like to dine, sir?"

"At any time that is most convenient to you," Julien hastened to reply, in a conciliatory tone. "You may have dinner served in my room."

When the door closed behind him, Manette and her son exchanged sarcastic glances.

"He a Buxieres?" grumbled Claudet.

"He is an *ecrigneule*," said Manette, shrugging her shoulders.

'*Ecrigneule*' is a word which in the mountain dialect means an effeminate person. From Mme.

Sejournant's lips that picturesque epithet sounded remarkably scornful.

"To think," sighed the Great Huntsman, running his fingers wildly through his bushy hair, "that that fellow is to be master here!"

"Master, indeed!" repeated Manette shaking her head. "He does not know anything and he is incapable of giving orders. He will be easily led. You see, Claudet, if we use a little policy, in two months time we will hold the reins."

"What do you mean by using policy, mother?"

"I mean to do things gradually and not to make such a fuss at once. That fellow is like a bird which has fallen from its nest. We must help him to get back and make ourselves so useful that he cannot do without us. When we have done that he will be in our power."

"You wish me to become the servant of a man who has stolen my inheritance from me!" protested Claudet indignantly.

"Not his servant, but his companion and his adviser! It would be so easy if you would try, Claudet! I tell you he is not malicious! When

he has been convinced that we are necessary to him, if some one, the priest, for example, would hint to him that you are Claude de Buxieres' son, he would treat you as a relative, partly from interest, partly from religious scruples."

"No," said Claudet, "I will not listen to anything of the kind! That is what M. Arbillot proposed yesterday, offering to tell the fellow himself of my relation to Claude de Buxieres and of the will which my father intended making in my favor. I forbade the notary to speak of it. I, to play the dog begging for crumbs from the man whom my father detested and to ask of him a part of his inheritance! Thank you, I would rather leave at once!"

"You would rather see your mother beg her bread from door to door!" said Manette, bitterly wiping away a tear.

"I have already told you mother, that when one has arms and a good will one need not beg. Enough—I am going to Auberive to notify the justice and lawyer."

While Claudet went upon his errand, the serv-

ant carried the new-comer's luggage to the room on the first floor, and Zelig, the maid, put sheets on the bed, aired the room and lighted a fire.

Soon afterward Julien was alone in his new quarters. The fire-place, in which a fire had not been made since winter, smoked unpleasantly, and the damp logs smoldered but did not burn. The late Claude de Buxieres' room had the uncomfortable aspect of one which has not been used for a long time.

Julien seated himself in one of the Utrecht velvet easy-chairs and poked the fire; he felt out of his element and had not the heart to arrange his clothes in the half-open cupboards which exhaled an odor of dampness. The slight sensation of joy which had for a moment possessed him on leaving the Vincart farm, had vanished. He felt more lonesome than ever. He thought of Reine's cordial welcome and the difficulties she had foreseen. The remembrance of the cozy interior of La Thuiliere made the cold, cheerless house at Vivey, peopled only with hostile serv-



ants, appear doubly cold and cheerless. Why were those people so ill-disposed toward him? He anticipated that he would meet with stubborn opposition on the part of his inferiors, and he was startled at the thought of the energy it would require to show them that he meant to be master at the castle.

Languidly, methodically, he proceeded to settle his effects in his cousin's rooms. He had barely finished when Zelig reappeared and began to lay the cloth. The girl cried in her patois as she saw the smoldering fire: "Ah, the wood did not burn?"

He stared at her as if she had spoken Hebrew.

"Be, be," she continued, "I will get you some fagots." She soon returned and kindled a fresh fire, then taking a long tube of iron pierced at both ends, she blew in it vigorously and soon the fire burned brightly.

"There!" said she, looking at Julien with a triumphant air, in which was visible a certain disdain for the gentleman who did not even know how to keep up the fire. "Now I will set the

table." As she placed upon the cloth the dishes, a bottle and a glass, Julien tried to make her talk. But the girl, either trained in advance or unable to understand M. de Buxieres' French, only answered his questions in monosyllables or in her patois, so that Julien was forced to desist without having obtained from her the least information.

Mlle. Vincart was right; he could not speak those peoples' language! He ate without any relish a breakfast upon which Manette had done her very best; he scarcely tasted the roast, and to Zelig's unbounded astonishment, diluted the old Burgundy largely with water.

"You may tell Mme. Sejournant," said he to the servant as he folded his napkin, "that I am not much of an eater and that one dish will suffice me."

While she cleaned the table, he went out into the air to take a glance at the lands which were to be his. The twenty-odd houses which composed the village and nestled at the foot of a wooded eminence, like eggs in a nest, formed a

single street which extended around the castle; he had soon made the circuit of it; the few inhabitants he met on his way, cast upon him cold glances in which lay more of curiosity than good will. He entered the small chapel; he knelt down and tried to collect himself, but the coarse images of the rustic sanctuary disturbed rather than soothed him. He left Vivey and followed the path which led toward the forest—not that the latter would interest him more than the former. The woods awoke no responsive echo in his breast. He did not know a beech from an ash and all plants were “weeds,” to him, but he felt the necessity of tiring his body by violent physical exercise. He walked for several hours without noticing anything and did not return to the castle until dusk.

Again the little maid brought him a dinner which he ate absently without observing whether his food was beef or mutton; immediately after his meal he retired and fell into a feverish sleep. Thus ended his first day.

The next morning at nine o'clock he was in-

formed that the justice, the lawyer and the registrar were awaiting him below-stairs. He went down and found the three men conferring in whispers with Manette and Claudet in the kitchen; when he entered, the conversation stopped abruptly, and during an awkward silence of several seconds, Julien felt all eyes turned upon him. At length he bowed, showed the justice the papers which confirmed his identity and requested him to proceed to work without delay.

The task commenced, not a room in the house was passed over; Claudet maintained his position near the justice and did not allow the slightest opportunity to escape by which he could manifest to Claude de Buxieres' legal heir his antipathy and ill-will. At eleven o'clock, Julien was formally invested in all his rights. But he was not yet through with the annoying formalities connected with his inheritance; he had to invite the three officials to lunch with him. This had been provided for by Manette, who had spent the entire morning preparing a plentiful repast and who had taken the precaution to draw Julien de

Buxieres aside in order to instruct him in the duties of a host.

When they entered the dining-room, young Buxieres noticed that five plates had been put on the table; he was wondering for whom the fifth cover was destined, when from a word dropped by the registrar he gathered that the unknown guest was no other than Claudet. Indeed Manette had not been able to bear the thought that her son, the constant companion of the late Claude de Buxieres, should that day be relegated to the kitchen. Deliberately she set a place for him at his master's table, thinking that the latter would not dare to offer an affront publicly to Claudet. She was not mistaken in her calculations; Julien, desirous of conciliating him, approached Claudet who stood proudly to one side and invited him to be seated.

"Thank you," said Claudet brusquely, "I have lunched."

And he turned his back on M. de Buxieres who was disconcerted and vexed.

The meal seemed interminable to Julien. The

three guests did honor to Mme. Sejournant's lunch and getting warmed gradually by their host's Burgundy, they related innumerable jokes and anecdotes. These, savoring somewhat of coarseness, jarred upon Julien's sensitive nerves. He succeeded in fulfilling his duties as host, but he ate little, and with difficulty suppressed an inclination to yawn. The justice, the registrar and the notary could not understand a young man of twenty-eight, who drank water, cared not for good cheer and rarely smiled. Finally rendered uncomfortable by their host's taciturnity, they rose from the table sooner than was their custom and prepared to take their leave.

Before setting out, Notary Arbillot slipped his arm familiarly through Julien's and led him into an adjoining room which served as billiard-room and library.

"M. de Buxieres," said he to him, pointing to a pile of documents lying on the green baize of the table, "you will find there all the titles and papers relative to the estates and succession. Put them away in order to study them at your leisure.

You will be interested in reading them. It is needless to tell you," he added, "that I am at your disposal if you want any advice or explanation; but if the questions are of only minor importance, you can refer to Claudet Sejournant, who is very well-posted in such affairs. With regard to that boy, M. de Buxieres, allow me to recommend him especially to your benevolence."

Here he was cut short by an imperious gesture from Julien, who said with a frown:

"If you please, M. Arbillot, we will not discuss that subject. I have already tried to be kind to M. Claudet, and during the twenty-four hours I have been here, he has insulted me twice. Do not speak of him again."

The notary, who was in the act of lighting his pipe, paused. From a feeling of good-fellowship toward the "Great Huntsman," and notwithstanding the latter's protestations, he had determined to inform Julien as to Claudet's birth. Prudently however he abstained from any explanation for the present.

"Very well, M. de Buxieres," he replied with a bow, "I will not mention him."

Thereupon he left the room and rejoined the justice and registrar.

The three men on their way to Auberive discussed the incidents of the lunch and the personal appearance of the new master.

"That Buxieres," said M. Destourbet, "does not resemble his deceased cousin, Claude."

"I understand that the two branches were unfriendly," pleasantly observed the notary.

"Poor Claudet," wailed registrar Seurrot, whom the wine had affected, "he will not have a penny of his father's fortune; I am so sorry!"

After the lawyer's departure, Julien resolved to transform into a study the room in which he had talked with M. Arbillot and to which they gave the name of "library," although it did not contain more than several hundred old books—books on hunting and manuals relative to agriculture. The room was spacious and lighted by two windows looking on the garden. The arrangement of the study took Julien several days and prevented him

from thinking too constantly of the trivial annoyances occasioned him by the secret animosity of Manette and her son.

To the horror of the castle servants, Julien sent to the lumber room the billiard-table at which Claude de Buxieres had so often played in company with his associates. According to his instructions the village carpenter made the shelves destined to receive the books which were to arrive by the stage coach.

That accomplished, Julien prepared to examine the papers left him by the notary in order to ascertain the nature of his income. But the work which he thought very simple soon proved to be complicated. The notary had told him that Claudet was an expert at such matters, and although he disliked to solicit his aid he was forced to ask him for an explanation.

Claudet responded with as much laconism and as little grace as accorded with his dignity. Julien then thought that he would apply to the debtors themselves whose names he found upon Claude's books. They were for the most part

rustics from the vicinity. They came to the castle, but when they entered Julien's presence, they discovered at once that before them was a man completely ignorant of the customs of the country and very poorly informed as to the affairs of Claude de Buxieres. The young man obtained no enlightenment from them. At the end of a few days he became discouraged and downcast. About him were only aggressive people or those disposed to dupe him. He divined that in the eyes of the entire community he was an intruder.

Although continually talking of going away, Manette Sejournant remained at the castle; her obsequious animosity was insupportable to Julien; but he lacked the necessary courage to either humble her or send her away. It almost seemed as if she were trying to render his life at Vivey so odious as to oblige him to beat a retreat.

One November morning Julien arrived at such a state of depression and mental relaxation that standing by the fire-place in the library he ques-



tioned if it would not be better to rent the castle and return to Nancy, to his tiny room in the Faubourg Saint-Jean where he could at least read, meditate, dream, without being tormented every moment by petty annoyances. His disposition was becoming embittered and his nerves unstrung.

As he gave way to that weakness, the sound of a door opening and shutting caused him to start; he turned his head, and saw, advancing toward his work-table, a young peasant who smiled at him, and as she smiled he recognized Reine Vincart. Reine wore a linen bonnet, and the hooded mantle of the better class. Beneath the white bonnet, ornamented with a bow of black ribbon, her brown hair curled rebelliously. The cool, November air had slightly tinged her cheeks with pink, and her dark eyes peeped out roguishly from under their long lashes.

"Good morning, M. de Buxieres," she said to him, "I suppose you remember me. It is not very long since we met at the farm."

"Mlle. Vincart!" exclaimed Julien, his face lighting up. "Certainly I remember you!"

He drew a chair near the fire and offered it to her. "The sight of the cordial hostess of La Thuiliere recalled the only pleasant memory of his stay at Vivey," he repeated.

"I remember you, and I am charmed to see you. I should have been over to thank you for your kind hospitality—but I have had so much work," and his face clouded over as he added, "and a great deal of worry."

"Is that so?" she asked. "Do not be offended, but that is evident; your features are drawn and your face is care-worn. Does not the air at Vivey agree with you?"

"It is not the air," replied Julien, "it is the people who do not suit me. And," he sighed, "I do not think I suit them any better. But it is enough that I am worried without worrying others! What can I do for you, Mlle. Vincart? Do you want anything?"

"Nothing at all!" cried Reine with a bright smile. "I not only do not want anything, but I have brought you something. Six hundred francs for a section we bought of the late M. de Bux

ieres!" She drew from beneath her cloak a small canvas bag containing gold, five franc pieces and bank-notes.

"Will you kindly look them over?" she continued, throwing the money on the table. "The amount should be there. Then, too, you must have it written down somewhere."

Julien fumbled vainly among the papers. At length vexed and impatient, he pushed aside all the documents, the loose leaves of which flew about the floor.

"How can one find anything amid such a chaos of papers?" cried he. "I can not; and when I try to obtain any information from the people here, it seems to me that they are leagued together to keep me in ignorance, or to confuse me still more! Ah, Mlle. Reine, you were right! I cannot understand your peasants. At times I am tempted to leave this place where they scorn me and where they treat me as an enemy!"

Reine glanced at him with an expression of compassionate surprise. She stooped quietly, gathered up the papers scattered at her feet and

placing them on the table, selected from among the heap a note which she held toward Julien.

"See," said she, "here is your paper! Truly sir, it seems to me you lack patience. We peasants are not as bad as you think we are; only we do not trust strangers very much. With us, beginnings are always difficult. I know something about it. When I returned from Dijon to La Thuiliere, I had not any more experience than you and I had a great many vexations. Where would we be now if I had become disheartened the very first day?"

Julien raised his eyes toward his interlocutor and blushed; he felt ashamed of being lectured by that rustic maiden, who seemed much more manly than he was.

"You reason like a man, Mme. Vincart," said he with timid admiration. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-three; and how old are you, M. de Buxieres?"

"Twenty-eight."

"There is not much difference, but you are my senior and what I have done you can surely do."

"Ah," said he sighing, "you have a taste for activity and I for repose. I do not like to act."

"So much the worse!" replied Reine decisively. "A man should exhibit energy. M. de Buxieres, allow me to speak frankly to you! If you wish others to come to you, you must first throw off your reserve and come to them. If you wish your neighbors to have confidence in you, you must be frank and kind with them."

"That has not succeeded up to the present with two persons here," replied Julien with a shake of his head.

"Which persons?"

"The Sejournants, mother and son. I have tried to be kind to Claudet and I have received nothing but rebuffs."

"Ah, you must excuse Claudet," she said hastily. "You could not expect him to receive one who supplanted him, very pleasantly."

"Supplanted? I do not understand."

"What," cried Reine, "have they not told you anything? That was a mistake. At the risk of interfering in that which does not concern me, I

think it better for you to know. Your cousin never married, but he had a child nevertheless. Claudet was his son and he intended to make him his heir. Everyone in the country knows that, for M. de Buxieres did not conceal the fact."

Then, as modestly as possible, she gave Julien an idea as to Claudet's position at the castle and as to the late Claude de Buxieres' intentions.

"Claudet is my cousin's natural son?" murmured Julien.

"Yes, and if M. de Buxieres had had time to write his will, you would not be here. But," added the young girl with a blush, "do not tell Claudet that I have said anything. I have perhaps talked too much. M. de Buxieres, will you please count the money and give me a receipt?"

She had arisen, and Julien looked in surprise at the pretty, sensible, business-like, rustic maiden. He bowed his head, gathered up the money lying on the table, wrote a receipt and handing it to Reine, said:

"Thank you, mademoiselle; you are the first

person who has been frank with me and I am grateful to you for it."

"Good day, M. de Buxieres!"

She had taken several steps toward the door when he followed her awkwardly. She turned with a bright smile on her lips and in her eyes.

"Courage!" she added and left the room.

Julien returned to his corner by the fire. Reine Vincart's revelations had completely stunned him.

Thanks to his inexperience, he had not for a moment suspected the true position of Manette and her son at the castle. And that young girl was to open his eyes! He felt humiliated at being so unobservant. After hearing Reine's story, Claudet's attitude seemed to him comprehensible and excusable. Indeed the boy was actuated by a sentiment of anger and pride quite natural. After all, he was the son of Claude de Buxieres—natural son it was true, but implicitly recognized, publicly acknowledged by his father. Had the latter taken time to complete the will they found, he would undoubtedly have constituted Claudet his heir. It was to an accident then that

Julien owed the fortune with which he was invested.

"Now that the situation has been revealed to me, what is my duty?" Julien asked himself.

The answer came:

"Religion and honesty demand that you recompense Claudet for the wrong done him by the carelessness of Claude de Buxieres."

Reine had merely stated the facts of the case without offering any advice, but it was evident that she considered there was an injustice to make reparation for. Julien knew that were he to do so, he would earn the respect and admiration of the mistress of La Thuiliere and he took secret satisfaction in assuring himself of it. He weighed the matter well all morning, then he rose and leaving the library, he repaired to the kitchen where Manette was preparing lunch.

"Where is your son?" he asked. "I wish to speak to him."

Manette glanced at him with a puzzled air.

"My boy," said she, "is in the garden, busy making a box in which to pack his effects, for

he does not wish to remain here any longer a burden to others. And, M. de Buxieres, you must find a servant to take my place for we shall not remain the rest of the week!"

Without replying Julien passed through the door leading into the garden and indeed found Claudet busy as his mother had said. Although he saw the heir of the Buxieres approach, he did not pay any heed to him.

"M. Claudet," said Julien, "can you spare me a few moments? I have something to say to you."

Claudet raised his head, hesitated a moment, then throwing aside his hammer and putting on his jacket, he muttered:

"I am at your service."

Leaving the shed, they sauntered along a walk beside which flowed a brook.

"Sir," said Julien suddenly halting, "pardon me for broaching a delicate subject, but it is necessary, seeing that I know all."

"What do you know?" asked Claudet, turning scarlet.

"I know that you are my cousin's son," replied the young man.

Claudet frowned.

"Ah," he interrupted, "my mother's tongue has been wagging, or else that magpie of a notary has been chattering to you!"

"No neither your mother nor M. Arbillot has told me; what I know I learned from a stranger; and I know too that you would be master here if Claude de Buxieres had taken the precaution to make his will. His negligence has caused a wrong which it is my place to make right!"

"Ah!" exclaimed Claudet. Then he muttered between his teeth: "You need do nothing—the law is on your side."

"I am not in the habit of consulting the law when duty is in the question. Moreover, M. de Buxieres treated you openly as his son; had he recognized you legally as he should have done, you would have a claim, even in default of a will, on a share of the property. That share I have come to offer you and to ask you to accept."

Claudet opened his wild, brown eyes in sur-



prise. The proposition seemed to him so improbable that he thought he was dreaming.

"You—you offer me a part of the fortune?" he stammered.

"Yes, and I am ready to sign a promise if you wish it."

Claudet shrugged his shoulders.

"I only ask one condition," continued Julien.

"What is it?" asked Claudet, who was still upon the defensive.

"It is that you will continue to live here with me and do as you did in your father's time."

By that time Claudet began to feel affected, although a sort of savage pride prevented him from yielding to emotion and arrested the words of gratitude upon his lips.

"What you have done is generous, sir," he murmured, "but you have not reflected carefully; you may regret it later on. By remaining here, I should annoy you."

"On the contrary, you would render me a service, for I am incapable of managing the property," said Julien, candidly. Then, growing

more communicative in proportion as his conscience became satisfied:

"You see," he cried, "I have no false pride. Come cousin, do not be prouder than I am and freely accept what I offer you with all my heart."

When he ceased speaking, his hand was gasped and cordially shaken.

"You are a true Buxieres!" said Claudet in a husky voice. "I accept—thank you! In exchange for your kindness I have nothing to give but my friendship. But that is as firm as a rock and it shall be yours while there is breath in my body."

IV.

Winter, with all its inclemencies, rain, snow and hail, arrived; the streams were swollen and the sharp north wind roared. Snow had been falling for an entire week. The roads had become impassable. Vivey lay wrapped in a snowy mantle. From the door of the castle to the gate, a narrow path had been trodden down by the servants' wooden shoes. Within large fires blazed in the grates, scarcely heating the lofty rooms. Julien de Buxieres was chilled physically and mentally. His generous conduct toward Claudet had, indeed, gained his heart, rendered Manette as tractable as a lamb, and turned the tide of popular opinion in the village in his favor—but, though the life materially had grown more bearable, he felt the chill of intellectual solitude none the less. Now that Claudet had resumed the charge of all the details of the business, Julien found the time too long.

His favorite books could not fill the void of the dull hours which dragged slowly along from morning until night. Manette's chatter, Claudet's hunting anecdotes had no interest for young Buxieres, and the friendships he had tried to form outside of home only wearied him.

His first visit had been to the pastor of Vivey, with whom he had hoped to be able to converse on subjects in harmony with his tastes; but he was doomed to disappointment.

Abbe Pernot was a man fifty years of age who thought more of performing his daily duties than of study. When he had said mass, read his breviary and confessed his devotees, he gave the remainder of his time to harmless distraction. He was somewhat inclined to stoutness, with a jolly, round face, black eyes, smiling lips, thin, gray hair and a cordial manner. When Julien entered the parsonage, he found the parson in a small room which served as his study and which was filled with objects having no connection with his religious functions: snares for larks, fishing nets, stuffed birds and a collection of beetles. At the



end of the room was a ponderous book-case containing a number of volumes which seemed to have been well used.

The parson, seated in a corner by the fire on a low stool, his cassock drawn up over his knees, was dissolving some bird-lime in an earthen saucepan.

"Good morning, M. de Buxieres," said he in his loud, jolly voice; "you have surprised me at work which is not very priest-like. I am preparing bird-lime to put in the woods when the snow has melted. I am not merely a curer of souls but a catcher of birds as well—less to divert my mind than to enrich my collection.

"Your charge allows you considerable leisure?" asked Julien with some astonishment.

"Yes—yes—enough. The parish is not very large, as you have seen. My parishioners are all excellent people, thank God, and they live to be very old. I have scarcely more than two or three marriages annually and as many burials. So one must do something in order not to fall into slothful habits. Every man should have a hobby!

Mine is ornithology! What is yours, M. de Buxieres?"

Julien felt tempted to reply: "Mine at present is ennui!" He was disposed to open his heart and to confess his trials to the priest, but instinct warned him that Abbe Pernot was not the man to understand the subtle complexities of his psychological condition and he answered briefly:

"I read a great deal. I have at the castle a large collection of religious and historical works which are entirely at your service, sir."

"A thousand thanks," said Abbe Pernot. "I am not, however, a great thinker, and my few books suffice me. Moreover too much reading gives me the headache. I require exercise and fresh air. Do you hunt or fish, M. de Buxieres?"

"I do neither."

"That is a pity. You will find the time hang heavy on your hands in this part of the country where diversion is not very plentiful. Bah, you cannot read continually, and when fine weather comes, you will yield to temptation, especially as you are so near Claudet Sejournant, a fellow

who knows how to kill a woodcock or to catch a trout. The trout in the Aubette, M. de Buxieres are excellent—salmon trout."

A pause ensued. Abbe Pernot divined that that conversation did not interest his guest and he said:

"Let me congratulate you, sir, with regard to Claudet. You have acted justly and Christian-like in making reparation for the late Claude de Buxieres' inconceivable wrong. Claudet, too, deserves what you have done for him. He is a fine fellow, a trifle too passionate and hasty perhaps, but he has a heart of gold. Ah, the deceased could not disown him; he has the blood of the Buxieres in his veins!"

"My cousin Claude," timidly ventured Julien, rising, "was, if one can believe dame rumor, given to carnal pleasure."

"Yes, yes," sighed Abbe Pernot, "he was wild! But what a shot he was! In spite of his faults, he had many good qualities, and I like to think that he is in heaven!"

Julien took leave of the Abbe and returned to the castle discouraged.

"That priest," thought he, "is too much attached to worldly things; I can count upon him no more than upon any of the others."

Of all the persons he had met since his arrival at Vivey, only one had seemed sympathetic and attractive and that one was—Reine Vincart. But Reine was a woman, and he feared women. He thought with Ecclesiastes:

"And I find more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and her hands as bands; whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her."

So he was more than ever reduced to his books and reflections, while his hypochondria returned.

About the beginning of January, the snow which had covered the valley of Vivey, gradually melted; a return of frost rendered the woods accessible to the huntsmen. Every day the forest resounded with their cries and the barking of dogs.

One evening, Claudet, seeing Julien more gloomy than he usually was, felt a sentiment of pity for the man who knew so little how to employ his time, his youth and his money. He looked upon it as his duty to rouse him from his

state of moroseness and to initiate him into the delights of a rural life.

"You are getting wearied here, M. Julien," said he, kindly. "I am sorry to see you thus; you will ruin your health if you remain shut up with your books so closely. Believe me, you will have to change your habits or you will become ill. If you will give yourself up to me, I will undertake to cure you of your ennui in a week."

"What is your remedy, Claudet?" asked Julien with a smile.

"It is very simple; it is to leave your books since they have not succeeded in diverting you, and to live like other folks! Your ancestors, the Buxieres, followed that plan and they never regretted it. If you are in Rome you must do as the Romans do."

"My dear friend," replied Julien, shaking his head, "one cannot change oneself. The Romans themselves would bid me return to my books."

"Bah, just try! You do not know what pleasure one can derive from the woods. You have no idea of the appetite one obtains from such

exercise and how merrily one can lunch seated with a circle of associates at the base of a tree! Zounds! While you are young, enjoy your youth! It will be time enough to mope in a corner by the fire when you have the rheumatism. You will reply that you are not a hunter and that you do not know how to handle a gun. That is it exactly. But the appetite comes as you eat, and when you have tasted the pleasures of the chase, you will desire to imitate your comrades. See here, to-morrow we have organized a party to Charbonniere: you know some of the gentlemen: Justice Destourbet, Registrar Seurrot, M. Arbillo and M. Boucheseiche. Will you join us? There will be lunch and laughter, and you will see some good shooting, that I'll wager!"

At first Julien refused, but Claudet insisted and represented the advisability of cultivating the acquaintance of the gentlemen from Auberive, —people of whom he might have need at any instant—people in whom was embodied the law of the canton. He pleaded so eloquently, that young Buxieres finally gave in.

Manette set to work at once to prepare the edibles which Hutinet was to take to Belle Etoile and it was decided that they would leave for that point at eight o'clock.

The morning arrived. Claudet and Julien started with their dogs; they were welcomed joyously by the party from Auberive on their arrival.

Justice Destourbet shook hands ceremoniously with the new master of the castle. Notary Arbil-
lot advanced toward Claudet, drew him aside and showing him a stuffed animal, said:

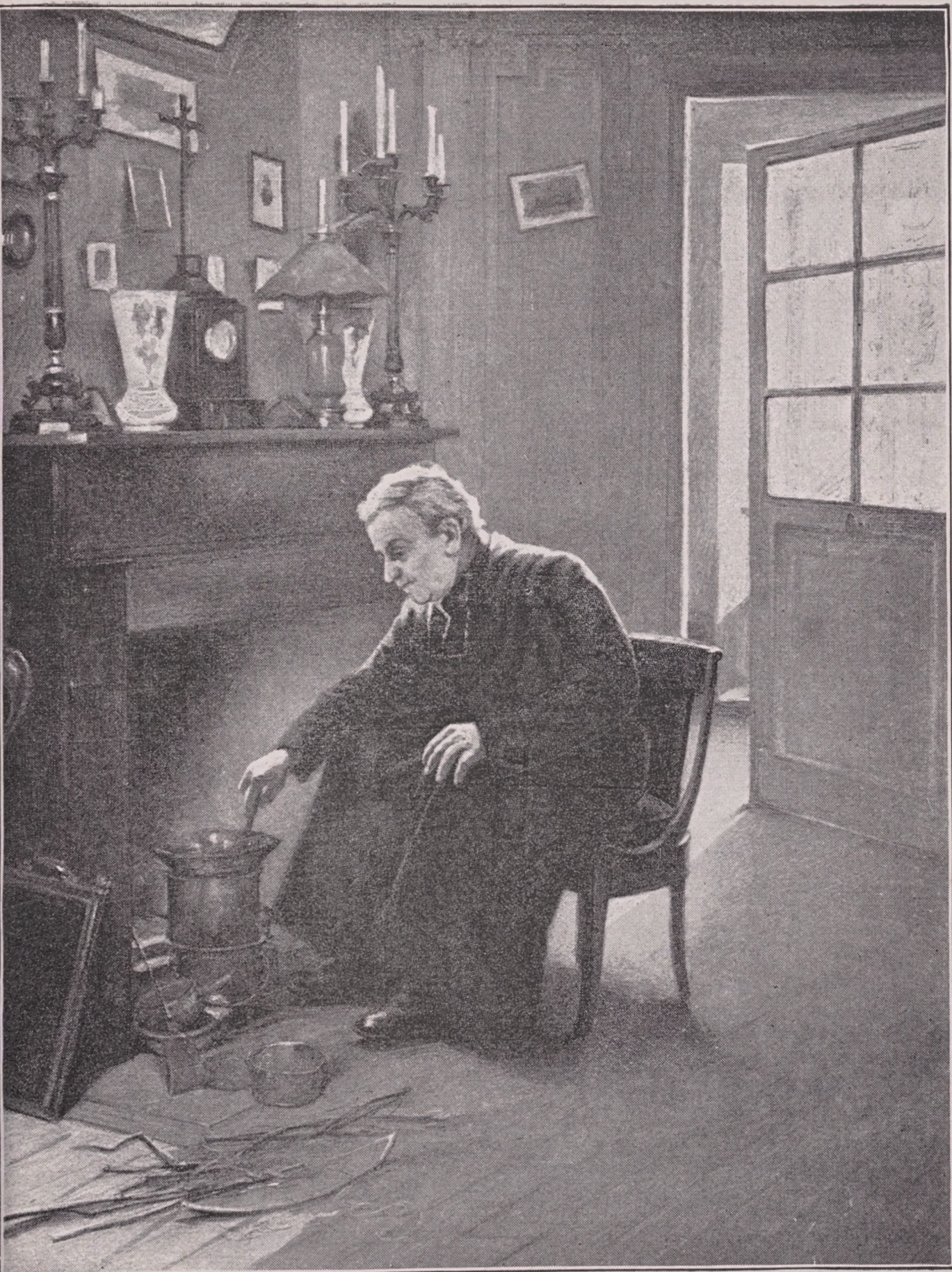
"Look here, we shall have some fun. When I was at Abbe Pernot's this morning, I stole a stuffed squirrel." He leaned toward Claudet and very mysteriously whispered the remainder of his confidence in his ear, a mischievous light dancing in his black eyes. "It will be a good joke," he continued, "to play on Boucheseiche."

Then he drew Claudet and Hutinet toward one of the trenches, when they vanished in the midst. During that colloquy, Collector Boucheseiche, against whom they were plotting, had monopolized Julien de Buxieres.

Justin Boucheseiche was a remarkably ugly man, large, bony, with a freckled face, red hair and hairy hands. He wore a brand new hunting costume; gaiters, metal helmet and a jacket with a number of pockets for holding cartridges. He pretended to be an expert hunter, although he was, in truth, the most awkward shot in the canton.

At luncheon the hunters did justice to Manette's viands. By the time the wine went the rounds, their tongues were loosened. Julien, scandalized, was again forced to listen to coarse jests which caused the blood to rush to his brow. Finally the meal was ended and they arose. As they passed along one of the trenches, the notary stopped at the foot of a beech tree, and, taking the collector's arm, whispered: "Collector, look up there in that bough at that fellow with the defiant air!" at the same time pointing to a squirrel sitting on its hind-legs. The animal, its ears pricked up, its fore-paws raised to its mouth, seemed in the act of cracking a nut.

"A squirrel!" exclaimed impetuous Boucheseiche.



"Let no one touch him, sirs; I will settle his account." The other hunters stood near him, smiling slyly. The collector raised his gun aimed at the squirrel and fired.

"Hit!" he exclaimed triumphantly, when the smoke had disappeared. Indeed the animal had slipped from its sitting posture, but had not fallen.

"It's reviving," said the notary in a jeering tone.

"Ah, you shall revive to-morrow!" cried Boucheseiche beside himself, and in his rage he fired a second shot; the animal remained in the same position. There was a general titter.

"He is obstinate!" said the registrar with a cunning smile.

Boucheseiche in amazement looked alternately at the tree and at his companions.

"If I were in your place, collector," hinted Claudet, "I would climb up in order to see."

But Justin Boucheseiche was no climber. He turned to a boy who was with the party and said:

"I will give you ten sous if you will climb the tree and bring me the squirrel." He did not have to repeat his offer. In a trice the boy mounted the tree; arrived at the bough in which the squirrel was lodged, he uttered an exclamation.

"Well" cried the collector impatiently, "throw him down."

"I can't, sir," replied the boy, "the squirrel is fastened with a wire."

The spectators burst into a roar of laughter.

"With a wire, wretch! You are making sport of me," yelled Boucheseiche. "Come down at once!"

"Here it is, sir," said the boy, laying the squirrel at the collector's feet.

When Boucheseiche discovered that it was stuffed, he swore roundly.

"Who played this trick on me?" he asked. But the huntsmen held their sides. Ironical congratulations resounded from all quarters.

"Bravo, Boucheseiche."

"That is game that one does not often find."

"Let us carry Boucheseiche in triumph!"

Notary Arbillot broke off a sprig of ivy and crowned Boucheseiche with it, while the rest clapped their hands and capered around the collector who was forced to join in the general mirth.

Julien de Buxieres alone did not participate in the hilarity. It vexed him that he could not enjoy that rather vulgar gayety. Without a word to Claudet, he waited until the hunters had scattered among the brush wood, and following a path which led in an opposite direction he left the band. The path led toward Planche au Vacher. Julien followed it slowly, experiencing a melancholy pleasure in making the frosty leaves crackle beneath his feet. It was a dreary sound which harmonized with his morose reflections. He was ashamed of the piteous face he had made during lunch. He acknowledged that although twenty-eight he was older and less active than any of these rustics, although they, with the exception of Claudet, were all past forty.

Having never had any childhood was he doomed to have no youth? While others took pleasure

in the slightest amusement, why did life seem so insipid and dull to him? Nothing affected him—everything seemed to him one perpetual repetition, a story told for the hundredth time. He was ashamed of his infirmities; he walked along, not knowing whither he was going. It was foggy and it was not until he had gone some distance that he perceived the court and the facades of La Thiuliere. He halted near the walk to look at an unexpected sight.

In the center of the yard stood Reine Vincart, her back towards Julien. She held her apron with one hand, and with the other took from that improvised sack a handful of grain which she threw to the birds flying around her. Every moment the band increased in numbers; among them were blackbirds with yellow beaks, robins and tomtits. It was a charming sight. When the food was exhausted, the young girl, shaking out her apron, turned and saw Julien leaning upon the wall.

"Are you there, M. de Buxieres?" she cried.
"Come into the yard! Do not be afraid; they

have finished their dinner! Those are my pensioners," she added, pointing to the birds; "since the last snow I have given them some grain every day. I believe they tell one another, for they grow in numbers. But I am not complaining! Several of them know me and are quite familiar."

As she talked he was seeking some pretext for remaining longer, but his habitual timidity paralyzed his tongue, and he was raising his hat in order to take leave of her when Reine said:

"I cannot ask you to come in, for I am obliged to go to the woods to see the wood-cutters who are improving the lot we bought of you. I believe, M. de Buxieres, that you are not yet familiar with your woods?"

"That is true," he replied with a smile.

"Very well, if you will accompany me, I will show you the district which is under cultivation. It will not be a loss of time, for it would be well that the people who work for you should know you are interested in their work."

Julien replied that he would be happy to be guided by her.

"In that case," said Reine, "wait for me. I will be with you in an instant."

Several moments later she reappeared in a white hood and knitted, woolen shawl.

"This way," said she taking a path across the fields.

At first they walked along in silence. The sky had cleared, the breeze was cool. Never had Julien de Buxieres been alone for so long a time with a young woman. He felt uneasy and at the same time delighted at the opportunity which permitted him to improve his acquaintance with the girl toward whom he was attracted by a secret sympathy. He did not know how to begin the conversation and the more he racked his brains, the less he could think.

Reine came to his aid.

"Well, M. de Buxieres, are matters going to please you now? You behaved very generously to Claudet, and he ought to be content."

'Has he told you?'



"No, but I am posted nevertheless. Good news, as well as bad, spreads very quickly and all the village is singing your praises."

"I only did a very simple and just thing," replied Julien.

"Simple and just things are the most difficult to do. And accordingly as they are done, one judges the character."

"Have you judged me favorably, Mlle. Vincart?" he hazarded with a timid smile.

"Yes, but my opinion is of very little importance. You should be satisfied yourself—that is essential. I am sure your life at Vivey will be more agreeable now."

"Hum, more supportable, certainly."

The conversation ceased again. As they neared the borders of the woods, they heard the barking of dogs, the sound of voices and two shots fired.

"Ha!" said Reine, "a party from Auberive is hunting in the woods and Claudet must be of the party. Why did you not accompany them?"

"He brought me along and I lunched with the gentlemen. But I must confess, Mademoiselle

Reine, those pleasures have very little charm for me; at the first chance offered, I slipped away."

"You did wrong! Those gentlemen will be insulted for they are very sensitive. You see when one lives among people one must submit to their customs and not turn up one's nose at their amusements."

"You repeat what Claudet said last night."

"Claudet was right."

"What shall I do? I do not care for hunting; I do not take any interest in the slaughter of innocent beasts."

"I understand that you do not like hunting for the sake of hunting. But the exercise in the open air, in the woods? Our forests are so beautiful! See, does not that speak a language of its own?" And she pointed from the height upon which they stood to the forest enveloped in a fairy-like and virginal robe.

"Yes, it is pretty," acknowledged Julien; "I have never paid any attention to such sights; it is you who have caused me to notice them for

the first time. But," he added with a sigh, "as the sun rises higher, all that phantasmagoria will melt and vanish. The beauty is short-lived and it is an admonition to us not to place too much value on perishable things."

Reine glanced at him in astonishment.

"Do you think so?" she cried. "I am not learned enough to answer you. All that I know is that if God created those beautiful things, he did so for us to enjoy them. And that is why I admire our woods. Ah, if you could see them in June when the leaves are fully out! There are flowers everywhere: yellow, blue, crimson! There is music everywhere too: that of the birds and streams; and everything smells so sweetly; the limes, the wild cherry trees, the bushes, red with berries! Whatever you may say, M. de Buxieres, I assure you that the beauty of the forest is not a perishable thing. It is renewed each season—in autumn when the wild fruits and leaves give it colors so rich; in winter, with its carpet of snow from which the tall beeches rise so high. Look!"

They were beneath the trees; over their heads was an arch of interlacing branches, about them an almost religious silence.

"Is it not grand?" asked Reine, with animation. "One could fancy oneself in a cathedral! Oh, yes, I love the forest! I feel tempted to pray!"

Julien looked at her with uneasy admiration. She trod as if in a church—so softly. Her white hood had fallen upon her shoulders and her hair, slightly disordered, formed a brown aureole around her olive face. Her almond-shaped eyes, sparkled beneath their long lashes and her delicate nostrils dilated. Among such surroundings she resembled a priestess of some mysterious temple of nature. At that moment she looked so true a picture of her name, "Queen of the Woods," that Julien, while moved by her peculiar beauty, shuddered superstitiously as he recalled the legends of his childhood. He asked himself if, like the Lamias and Dryads of old, that "Queen of the Woods" was not an elementary spirit embodied in the form of a woman, sent to ruin his soul.

He followed her fearfully at a distance. Suddenly she turned as if to bid him hasten. He then perceived that they had reached the end of the forest of old trees, and that before them the section spread its glades; among the trees rose a cloud of smoke which indicated the encampment of the wood-cutters.

Reine proceeded in that direction and presented the new master to the workmen. They bowed awkwardly and glanced sharply and somewhat roughly at him in the manner of mountain peasants receiving a stranger.

The head woodman, replying to Reine's remarks, said in a familiar tone:

"Make yourself easy, mademoiselle, they will act for the best. If you will come with me, you will see that the men are not standing idle. They are about to cut down an oak, and in less than fifteen minutes it will be on the ground, cut as neatly as if with a razor."

They approached the spot whence came the sounds of blows given with an axe. The gigantic tree did not seem to feel them; it stood there

proudly and impassively. Then the blows redoubled; it was shaken from base to summit. The blows fell thick and fast, but the oak had regained its impassibility and stoically bore the assaults of the woodmen. To see it so erect and grand, one would have declared it would never yield. Suddenly the men drew back; there was a moment of solemn expectation; abruptly the enormous tree swayed and fell with a tragical sound of crashing branches.

With unconscious emotion the men glanced at the oak lying upon the ground.

Reine had turned pale; her dark eyes were tearful.

"Let us go," she whispered to Julien de Buxieres, "the death of that tree has affected me as if it had been the death of a human being."

They took leave of the woodmen and turned homeward. Reine did not speak, and her companion did not know how to renew the conversation, so they walked along in silence until they saw the chimneys of Vivey.

"You have only to go straight ahead to get

home," said she briefly. "Good-bye, M. de Buxieres."

They separated and he watched her slowly disappear in the distance.

V

In the mountainous district of which we are writing, spring does not begin until the end of May. Until that time the cold weather continues. Hoar frost and April showers arrest vegetation and allow nothing but small, sickly buds to appear at the ends of the branches. But, at the approach of June when the sun has warmed the earth, a sudden metamorphosis occurs. One night sometimes suffices to produce a spring-like efflorescence.

In the park, in the village orchards, spring was donning her festal garments. Unconsciously Julien de Buxieres inhaled the fragrance which was new to him, and in his over-excitement, he thought once more of Reine Vincart, of that "Queen of the Woods" who, to him, was the personification of the enchantments of the forest.

Since their walk in January among the trees of Charbonniere, he had seen her occasionally; some-

times on Sunday in the tiny church at Vivey, sometimes at a corner of the road. They had exchanged ceremonious bows, but they had not spoken.

More than once at nightfall, Julien had stopped at the court-yard of La Thuiliere, to gaze at the farm windows. He had not dared to knock at the door; foolish timidity restrained him. He returned to the castle discontented and reproaching himself for his awkwardness, which was like a wall between him and the only person with whom intimacy seemed desirable.

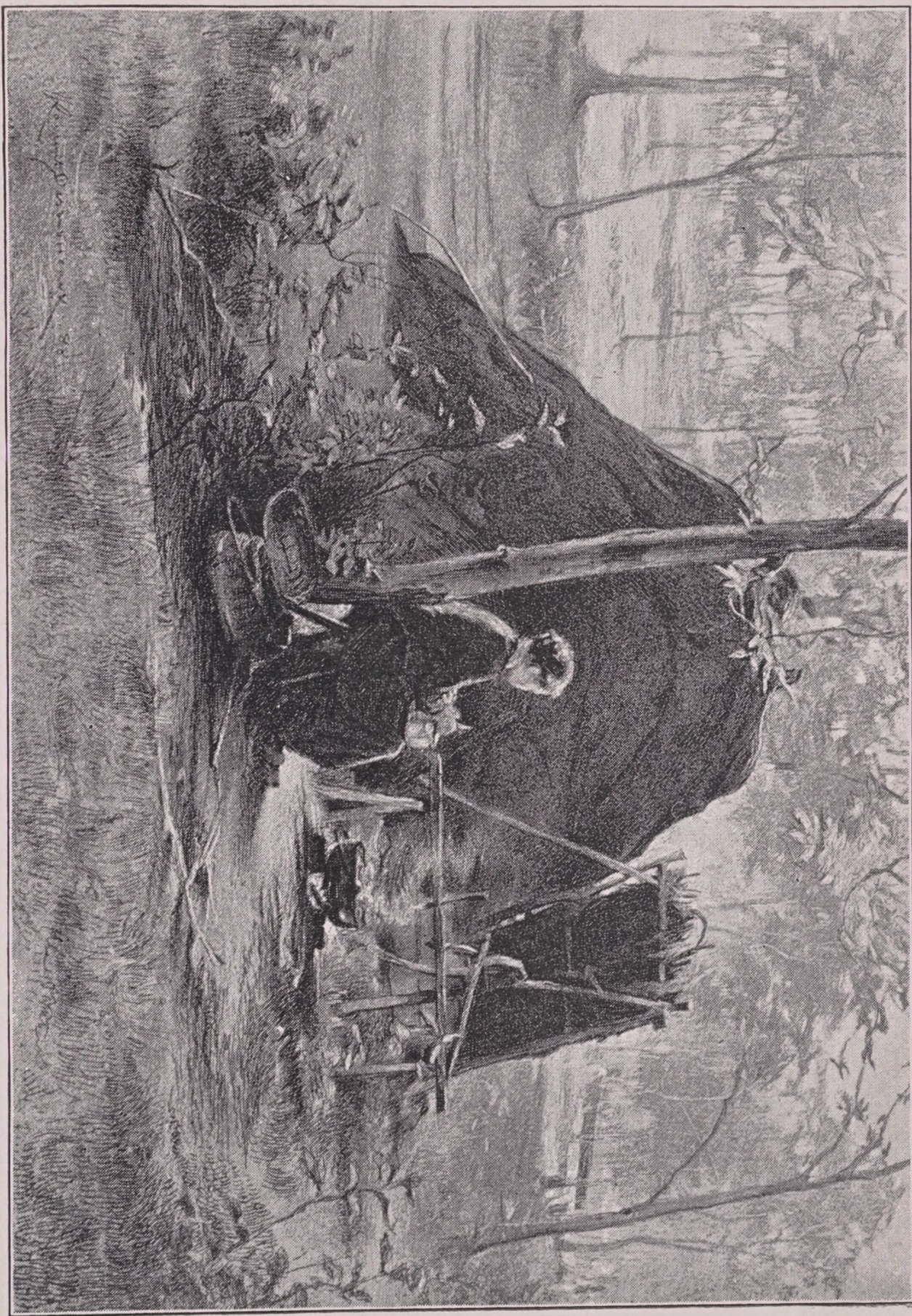
At other times startled at the large share of his thoughts occupied by a woman, he congratulated himself on having resisted the dangerous temptation of seeing Mlle. Vincart again. He confessed secretly that that strange girl exercised a power over him against which he should have to be on his guard.

Reine lived comparatively alone at La Thuiliere, for her father could not be considered any protection. Julien's visits might compromise her, and the young man's principles

forbade him causing a scandal he could not atone for. He did not dream of marriage, and had he done so, the social laws which he had always obeyed would have vetoed his marrying a peasant. Honesty and prudence, therefore, commanded him to conduct himself toward Mlle. Vincart with rigorous reserve. Nevertheless Reine's image haunted him. She exercised over Julien a potent charm. He had never ventured to broach the subject to Claudet. Each time that the name of Reine Vincart arose to his lips a secret modesty together with his native timidity, prevented him from questioning Claudet as to the character of that mysterious "Queen of the Woods."

Claudet's keen eyes perceived that his efforts to cheer M. de Buxieres met with no success. He attempted to discover to what cause that sudden access of melancholy was owing, and finally concluded that it proceeded from an excess of knowledge.

"M. de Buxieres," said Claudet to him one evening when they were walking silently side by





side in the park, "one thing grieves me; it is that you have no confidence in me."

"What makes you think so, Claudet?" asked Julien in surprise.

"Your actions; you are very uncommunicative. When you wished to repair Claude de Buxieres' wrong, and when you offered me a home with you, I accepted without any hesitation. I hoped that when you gave me a place at your table, you would give me one in your heart, and that you would allow me to share your cares and your joys as a comrade."

"I assure you, my dear friend, that you are mistaken. If I had any serious trouble you should be the first to know them."

"It is all very well to talk—you are bored, however! that can be seen in your face; and would you like me to tell you why? Because you are too wise, M. de Buxieres, and because you need a wife to divert your mind."

"Oh, oh," replied Julien with a blush, "would you like to marry me off, Claudet?"

"That would be a difficult matter. No, but I

should at least like to see you take notice of some woman—a jolly girl who would cheer you up; there is no lack of them here; indeed, it would bother you to make your choice.”

M. de Buxieres colored again and looked disconcerted.

“That is a singular proposition to make,” he cried; “do you take me for a libertine?”

“Do not get on your high horse, M. de Buxieres! Those of whom I speak have always got their caps set in the forest trees.”

“I care not for them; I am not the kind of man you think me, Claudet; I do not enjoy such pleasures.”

“They are, however, the pleasures of people of our age. Perhaps you are timid because you exaggerate the difficulties? It is very easily done—an arm is slipped around a waist, two kisses adroitly bestowed and the rest is simple!”

“Enough,” interrupted Julien, severely; “I will not listen to you!”

“As you wish, M. de Buxieres. If I broached the subject it was because, seeing that you cared

little for the chase or for fishing, I fancied you might perhaps like to hunt other game. Indeed, I should like to divert you somewhat!" added Claudet, mortified at the failure of his proposals. "See here, will you go to the woods with me tomorrow? The colliers finished building their cabin this evening and expect to dedicate it tomorrow. They call it 'watering the bouquet,' and on that occasion they hold a festival to which we, as well as the purchasers of the section, are invited. Of course the guests pay their tribute in bottles of wine! You must not neglect appearing amongst those good people, for it is the custom. I have promised to be there and Reine Vincart, who has bought the lot, will surely not fail to assist at the ceremony."

Julien was just about to decline Claudet's offer when the sound of Reine Vincart's name caused him to change his mind. For a moment he wondered if Claudet had not mentioned her as a bait and an argument in support of his theories on free love in the country. However that might have been, the mention of the possible presence

of Mlle. Vincart at the fete, rendered young Buxieres more tractable, and he offered no more resistance.

The following day, after a hasty lunch, they set out together for the section. The men had established themselves at no great distance from the cutting in which in the month of January, Reine and Julien had visited the wood-cutters.

Beneath the shade of an enormous beech tree, rose the hut with its peat-covered roof, and on the site of the cleared ground two furnaces had been built—one of them was entirely finished, the other in course of construction.

The colliers were coming and going; among them was the master-collier, a middle-aged man with a tanned face and small, glittering eyes; his wife, shriveled and thin, his daughter, a girl of seventeen, likewise thin, with hair disheveled and a cunning face; the master's three sons—robust boys who served as apprentices. In addition to those, there were the daughters of several woodmen attracted by the prospect of a day of dancing and feasting. All were scattered about

under the trees awaiting the dinner, the food for which was brought principally by those invited; the part contributed by the colliers being limited to a dish of potatoes, which the master's wife had cooked in a large caldron over a fire lighted in front of the cabin.

The arrival of Julien and Claudet, accompanied by a boy who carried a load of provisions, was hailed with cries of satisfaction and welcome. While one of the apprentice colliers carefully unpacked the loaves of bread, the enormous pasty and the bottles encased in straw, Reine Vincart appeared among the trees, followed by a farm-hand laden with a basket from which peeped forth the necks of bottles and the end of a smoked ham.

At the sight of the young mistress of La Thuiliere, the cheers rang out more lustily.

Under the verdant shades of the beeches Reine seemed to Julien more attractive than among the branches powdered with frost. Her spring costume, simple and rustic, suited her admirably; a light blue and yellow striped

skirt; a jacket of plain material with a low collar laced with blue ribbon, and a bunch of flowers at her breast completed her toilet. She wore stout shoes and a straw hat which she carelessly left in the cottage on her arrival. Among those sunburned, blackened countenances, her face with its delicate oval, her black eyes, her smiling, red lips, her thick, brown hair, dressed low, cast a radiance over the fete. She was like a triumphant image of the "Queen of the Woods" springing up among her rural subjects. As an emblem of her woodland royalty she pressed to her bosom an enormous bouquet of wild flowers gathered on her way—haw-thorn, grasses and scarlet poppies. They emitted a sweet fragrance and the pollen from them had powdered the young girl's brows and hair.

"See, M. Theotime," said she, holding her sheaf toward the collier, "I gathered these for the bouquet they are to plant on the roof of your lodge."

She then advanced toward Claudet, shook hands with him and bowed to Julien. "Good morning, M. de Buxieres, I am pleased to see you here.

Did Claudet bring you or did you come of your own free will?"

While Julien was awkwardly casting about for a reply, she left them, passing from group to group and watching with interest the placing of the bouquet in position. One of the colliers climbed to the thatched roof by means of a ladder and fastened it to a staff. When the flowers were fixed, he waved his felt hat, crying: "How—houp!"

That was the signal for all to assemble at the table. The food had been spread upon a cloth under the shade of a beech tree and all the guests seated themselves around it upon sacks filled with coals. For Reine and Julien were reserved two stools made by the master collier, and these stools were ranged side by side.

When the keen edge was somewhat taken off the appetites of the assembly, tongues began to loosen.

Did Reine's presence impose a certain restraint upon these people? Julien noticed that the remarks made by them were infinitely less broad than those of the citizens of Auberives

with whom he had once lunched; the gayety kept within the bounds of decency and did not call a blush to his cheek.

He felt more at ease with those peasants than with the worthies from the borough and he no longer regretted having accompanied Claudet.

"I am glad that I came," he murmured as a compliment in Reine's ear. "I have eaten with such relish."

"Well, that is fine!" gayly replied the girl. "Perhaps you will now like our woods."

When nothing more remained on the cloth but bones and empty porringers, M. Theotime took a bottle of wine, uncorked it and filled the glasses.

"Now," said he, "before watering the bouquet, we will drink to M. de Buxieres who brought us this excellent wine, and to our charming Mlle. Vincart."

Glasses clinked and many were emptied.

"Mlle. Reine," continued M. Theotime with gravity, "you see the lodge is built, we will sleep there to-night,—and I hope will do good



work here. You can see from here that our first furnace is built and ready to light. But that it may bring good-luck to us, you must light the fire yourself. Will you throw in the first embers?

"Gladly;" cried Reine.

Come, M. de Buxieres, you must see how a furnace is lighted."

All rose noisily; one of the men took the ladder and put it in place. Meanwhile M. Theotime brought an earthen vessel filled with lighted coals. Reine climbed the ladder nimbly, arrived at the top, and stood erect near the opening. One by one she took the shovelfuls of coal which the collier handed her and cast them into the chimney. A crackling sound within was followed by a dull roar; the small bits of wood and twigs collected at the bottom had ignited.

"Bravo! that is it!" exclaimed M. Theotime.

"Bravo!" repeated the young people. Boys and girls joined hands and danced around the

furnace. "Reine, a roundel! sing us a roundel!" cried the maidens.

Reine, standing at the top of the ladder, without requiring any urging, sang a popular ballad in a clear, well-pitched voice. Repeating the refrain, the lads and lasses tripped merrily around.

Leaning against the trunk of a tree, Julien listened to Reine's melodious voice and did not remove his eyes from the singer's face. When she had finished her song, Reine descended the steps of the ladder; but the dancers had been infected by that first song, they could not remain in their places; one of the colliers in his turn struck up a popular air which the entire band repeated in unison. Carried away by the rhythm, they danced on.

With the exception of Theotime and his wife, who had gone to watch the furnace, all the guests, including Claudet, had joined the dance. Only Reine and Julien remained beneath the trees. It was noon and the heat of the sun made the shade desirable. Reine proposed to her com-

panion that they enter the lodge and remain there until the return of the dancers. Julien accepted, very much astonished that the young girl should propose a *tete-a-tete* in an obscure cottage. Although he was more fascinated than ever by Mlle. Vincart's original beauty, the temerity of her relations with him embarrassed him. A prey to the doubts which had oppressed him at the close of the winter, he knew not whether to attribute that frankness to candor or boldness. After the repast in the open air, after the rondo dance around the furnace, he was at once happy and troubled upon being left alone with Reine. He would have liked to have told her of the admiration he felt for her, but he did not know how to express himself; so he glanced fixedly at her with his enamored eyes, while his companion absently twisted a branch of wild-honeysuckle between her fingers. Rendered uncomfortable by his glance, she broke the silence.

"You do not talk, M. de Buxieres; do you regret having come here this morning?"

"Regret?" he cried, "I have never spent so de

lightful a day, and I have you to thank for it, mademoiselle, for it is all owing to you."

"To me? You must thank the woodmen's humor, the spring sun and the bracing forest air. I have done nothing."

"On the contrary, it is all owing to you," he cried tenderly. "Before knowing you, I saw peasants, the sun and trees, and none of them made any impression upon me. But as soon as you sang I felt enlightened. I comprehend the beauty of the woods, I like the people, the beech trees, all those things in the midst of which you take pleasure in living. It is you who have worked this miracle! Ah, you have been appropriately named. You are truly the fairy of the fete, the 'Queen of the Woods.'"

Surprised at her companion's agitation, Reine looked at him stealthily from beneath her lashes, and she thought him changed indeed.

He seemed to have suddenly thawed. He had no longer that awkward stiffness, that restraint which formerly clogged his movements and chilled his speech. His frail form seemed more

supple, his blue eyes larger and brighter; at that moment they lighted up his delicate features with a glow of warmth and lent them a melancholy charm, something tender and passionate.

The young girl was pleased at the confidence reposed in her for the first time by Julien. Far from being dazzled by his words, she replied in a gay tone:

"In point of 'Queens of the Woods' working miracles, I know only these flowers."

She took from her breast the bouquet of white star-like flowers bordered with a collarette of green leaves and held it toward him, saying:

"Do you know those? Smell how sweet they are! And their odor increases as they wither!"

Julien raised the bouquet to his lips and inhaled the perfume.

"Our woodmen," she continued, "make a tea from this plant with which they cure cold and heat as if by enchantment; then too, they steep it in white wine to draw from it a beverage they call 'May wine' and which intoxicates them."

Julien listened vaguely to those details. With

his eyes fastened eagerly upon Mlle. Vincart, he continued to inhale the perfume and in his turn became intoxicated.

"Give me those flowers!" he said in stifled tones.

"Certainly," she replied gayly, "keep them if they will give you any pleasure."

"Thank you," murmured he, hiding them in his breast.

Reine was surprised at the exaggerated importance which he seemed to attach to so slight a favor, and a sudden blush mounted to her cheeks. She almost regretted having given him her flowers when she saw the manner in which he received them; so she replied in a tone almost of correction:

"Do not thank me; the gift is not of any importance. There are thousands of such flowers growing in the forest; one has only to stoop and pick as many as one wishes."

He dared not reply that the bouquet having been worn by her had a very rare value. Was not that favor so easily accorded him by Reine

a tacit encouragement to demand more? Had he to deal with a simple maiden or a village coquette accustomed to be courted? He recalled Claudet's advice on the manner of conducting love-making with certain country maids.

Coquette or not, Reine had bewitched him. The charm worked more forcibly since he had been alone with her in that obscure cottage. Julien fairly devoured Reine's curly hair, falling upon the nape of her neck, her almond-shaped eyes, the rosy lips, the two tiny brown marks upon her neck. He thought her adorable and longed to tell her so, but when he attempted to put his declaration into words, they seemed to stick in his throat. His blood tingled in his veins, his throat was parched, his head whirled. In his confusion, he tried to brace himself up by repeating Claudet's rules: "A hand slipped about the waist, two kisses adroitly bestowed and the rest will follow."

Brusquely he approached the girl:

"Since you have given me those flowers," he began in an unsteady voice, "will you in token

of friendship give me your hand—as you do to Claudet?"

She held out her hand after a moment of hesitation; scarcely had he touched it than, completely infatuated, with the other arm which was free, he encircled Reine's waist, drew her towards him and kissed her bare neck.

The young girl was stronger than he; in a trice she disengaged herself from his audacious embrace, violently repulsed M. de Buxieres and with one bound reached the door of the cottage. Arrived there, pale, indignant, her eyes glowing with anger, she murmured:

"If you come near me, I will call the colliers."

But Julien had no desire to renew his attack. Already brought to his senses, with lowered head and a repentant air he shrank into the darkest corner of the lodge.

"Are you mad," she continued vehemently, "or has the wine mounted to your brain? You are following in your deceased cousin's footsteps very rapidly. But I warn you such actions will not succeed with me!"



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As she spoke tears filled her eyes.

"I did not expect that of you, M. de Buxieres."

"Pardon me," stammered Julien, whose heart contracted at the sight of her tearful eyes. "I have conducted myself like a wretch, a boor! It was a moment of madness—forget it and pardon me."

"No one has ever treated me with disrespect," said the young girl. "I made a mistake in treating you so familiarly—that is all. It shall not happen again."

Julien remained silent, overwhelmed with shame and regret. Suddenly the voices of the dancers who were approaching could be heard repeating the refrain of a song.

"There are our people," murmured Reine, "I am going to rejoin them—adieu—do not follow me."

She left the cottage, while Julien, stunned by the rapidity with which that scene had taken place, seated himself on one of the benches, a prey to mingled feelings of shame and of rage. He had no desire to reappear in public, by the

side of that maiden whom he had so stupidly offended and whom he dared not face. It was evident he knew nothing of women since he could not even distinguish a respectable woman from one who was not.

Why had he not been able to see that Reine Vincart's friendliness had nothing in common with the provoking allurements of the creatures, who, according to Claudet, "set their caps beneath the trees in the forest."

That confirmation of his inaptitude for proper judgment, exasperated and mortified him. Never had Reine Vincart seemed to him as pretty as when in her indignation she escaped from him.

The glance at once angry and sad which she had cast upon him, the expression about her mouth, the dilation of her nostrils, the heaving of her bosom, all recurred to him, and the recollection of her proud, original beauty redoubled his chagrin. He remained for some time in the cottage. When he heard the sound of voices disappear in an opposite direction, and when he was positive that the colliers were busy

around the furnace, he decided to leave his retreat. But he did not care to speak to any one; instead of crossing the section, he passed among the trees desirous of avoiding the sight of human faces.

As he wandered along, Julien thought of the probable result of his unfortunate prank. Reine would certainly not speak of the insult he had offered her, but would she forget the affront? Would not that adventure result in the cessation of their friendship? Would she be inexorable?

In the midst of his sorrow, Julien was sustained by a vague hope of reconciliation. In recalling the details of that scandalous scene, he remembered that the young girl had seemed more broken-hearted than angry. The accent of reproach with which she had murmured: "I did not expect that of you, M. de Buxieres!" led him to hope for a possibility of some day obtaining pardon. His regret at the same time, was a proof of the hold the girl had already upon his heart. How dull and insufferable life would be to him were he to remain at variance with his "Queen

of the Woods!" Such were his mournful reflections as he attained the borders of the forest. He looked down upon the calm valley of Vivey; to his right lay the castle-towers, to his left the path leading to La Thuiliere through the meadows of Planche au Vacher. Suddenly the sound of voices near by attracted his attention and on that solitary path, he perceived Reine and Claudet walking side by side. The voices were indistinct; he could not understand the words exchanged, but by the intonations, by the attitudes, he could tell that the conversation was very animated; it was sometimes interrupted by bursts of laughter from Claudet or a gesture from Reine.

Once Julien saw the girl place her hand familiarly upon Claudet's shoulder and he felt a pang of jealousy. The young couple reached a stream which crossed the path and whose bed had been swollen by the recent rains. Claudet put his arm around Reine, lifted her in his strong arms and strode through the water, then they disappeared among the brushwood, though for sometime Julien could hear the murmur of their voices.



"Ah," thought he, "she stands on less ceremony with him than with me! How closely they walked in that pathway! With what animation they conversed; with what confidence she allowed him to carry her! That was indicative of a long intimacy and explained much to him! He recalled Reine's visit to the castle and how cleverly she had informed him of the relations existing between Claudet and the late Claude de Buxieres; how she had moved him to pity the fate of the "Great Huntsman," and had him to make reparation for the deceased's neglect.

"Blindman that I was!" continued Julien; "I saw nothing, understood nothing of their maneuvers! They loved one another, that is sure, and in all this I have played the part of dupe. She is no better than the rest; she flirted with me in order to assure a position for her swain! Ecclesiastes was right!"

Twilight was creeping on apace; the forest was growing shadowy. Slowly Julien descended the decline which led to the castle, and his heart was as dark as the forest itself.

VI

Jealousy is a mischievous deity, of the race of Harpies. She corrupts all that she touches. From the night upon which Julien had seen Reine and Claudet crossing the stream at Planche au Vacher together, a secret poison had mingled with his feelings and given them a savor of bitterness. Neither the bright June sun nor the glories of the forest had any more charm for him. The earth seemed to him an odious theater upon which a bloody, monotonous drama was being constantly enacted. He identified nature with woman, attributing to both the same deceitful appearances and beauties, the same spirit of perfidy. The people about him inspired him with defiant, suspicious thoughts. In every peasant he saw an enemy meditating deception with his cajoling words and hypocritical air. He no longer went out, fearing that he might meet Reine Vincart. He fancied that the sight of her

would augment the pain from which he was suffering and for which he was eagerly seeking a remedy. But his wound still remained.

When at evening, seated at his window, he heard Claudet whistle to his dog and disappear in the direction of La Thuiliere, he felt assured that he was going to meet the "Queen of the Woods" by appointment. He was tempted to leave his room and follow his rival, then he blushed at such cowardice. Was it not enough to have once involuntarily played the role of spy? What comfort could he derive from such villainy? Would he be benefited when he returned, his senses and heart inflamed after witnessing a love scene between the two young people? That thought kept him at home but he could not control his imagination.

Julien pictured to himself the meeting of the lovers in the center of fields bathed in the soft light of the moon. His brain whirled. He saw Reine advance and Claudet slip his arm around her supple waist. He fancied, with a tremor, the intoxications of the first words exchanged, of

the first kisses. Then his heart ached bitterly, his throat contracted; he leaned, almost fainting against the window and closed his eyes and ears not wishing to see or hear—desiring to annihilate himself in a torpor of the flesh and mind. He did not succeed. The image of that bewitching "Queen of the Woods" presented itself to him as he had admired it in the shadow of the collier's hut. He put his hand to his eyes. He could not shut out the sight of her deep, black eyes and her attractive red lips. The odor of the honeysuckles arising from the garden, strengthened that vision by recalling to Julien the faded sprig which Reine had twisted between her fingers during their last interview. The scent of the flowers at night seemed like an emanation from the young girl and exhaled a bitter perfume like the regret of a lost love.

"Why," thought Julien, "was I lured to such a hope? Can that maiden, so robust, so strong of will, love a being as weak and wavering as I am? No, she should have a lover full of life and strength, a bold huntsman capable of pro-



tecting her! What sort of a figure would I make by the side of so vigorous a man?"

In his access of jealousy against Claudet, he was vexed less at his being beloved by Reine than at his having so carefully concealed his love. As he secretly blamed him for that lack of frankness, he did not remember that he was open to a similar reproach in hiding from Claudet what he had in his heart. Since the night of the fete at the cottage he had been taciturn and morose; he shut himself up in a sulky silence which wounded his cousin. They met daily at the same table, apparently their intimate relations continued, but there was no confidence between them.

Julien's sullenness made Claudet uneasy and he sought in vain for its cause. He had done nothing to provoke that coldness; on the contrary he had endeavored to prove his gratitude by all sorts of kind offices. Claudet finally wondered if Julien was not beginning to repent of his generosity and if the coldness shown him was not one way of manifesting that repentance. That

supposition seemed to him the only explanation possible of his companion's conduct.

"He is already tired," said he, "of keeping my mother and me at the castle."

Claudet's dignity arose up in arms. He did not wish to be a burden to any one and he took offense in his turn at the mute reproaches he thought he could read upon Julien's care-worn face. Soon that misunderstanding, fed by the silence in which both parties took refuge, grew to such an extent that a crisis was imminent.

The storm burst one evening after supper, when Julien's ill-humor became more evident than ever before. Irritated by that persistent taciturnity, and more and more persuaded that his presence was insupportable to young Buxieres, Claudet resolved to have an explanation. Instead of leaving the dining-room when dessert was served and of calling his dog to take his usual walk, the "Great Huntsman" remained seated, poured himself out a glass of whisky and slowly filled his pipe.

In surprise, Julien rose and walked up and

down the room. He fancied that Claudet, perceiving his jealousy, had given up his walk solely to turn away his suspicions. That supposition incensed him all the more and stopping near the table with an angry air, he broke the silence.

"You are not going out?" he asked brusquely.

"No," replied Claudet, "if you will permit me, I will keep you company. Will it annoy you?"

"Not at all, only as you are in the habit of taking a walk every evening, I should not like to have you inconvenience yourself. Solitude does not frighten me, and I am not selfish enough to wish to deprive you of society more agreeable than mine."

"What do you mean by that?" exclaimed Claudet.

"Nothing, except that the thought of being obliged to keep me company must not deprive you of a pleasure or of a meeting."

"A meeting?" cried his companion with a forced smile; "so you think that when I go out after supper it is to chase the girls. A meeting—with whom, if you please?"

"With your sweetheart, of course," said Julien. "According to what you told me, there is no lack of girls here disposed to set their caps for the men and you will have no trouble in making a choice. I thought you were courting some woodman's daughter or some farmer's pretty lass, like—like Reine Vincart!"

"Reine Vincart!" repeated Claudet quickly; "how can you mention her name in the same breath with those creatures of whom you have just spoken? Mlle. Vincart," he added, "has nothing in common with them, and you are wrong, M. de Buxieres, to treat her so lightly."

The allusion to Reine Vincart had so greatly excited Claudet that he did not observe that Julien in naming her was as much affected as he.

The vehemence with which Claudet spoke augmented young Buxieres' irritation.

"Eh, eh," said he with a sneer; "Reine Vincart is a very pretty girl."

"She is not only pretty, but she is a lady and deserves to be respected."

"How valiantly you defend her! One can see that she holds sway over your heart."

"I defend her because you suspect her unjustly. But bear this in mind, it is not necessary for any one to guarantee her respectability; her good name is sufficient defense. Ask all the village; not one voice will be raised against her."

"Come," murmured Julier sarcastically, "confess that you love her!"

"Well, suppose I do?" said Claudet impatiently. "Yes, I love her! There, are you satisfied?"

Although he had been convinced of it, Buxieres was startled by that avowal when he heard it from Claudet's own lips. At first he did not speak, then he said:

"You love her! Why did you not tell me sooner? Why were you not frank with me?"

As he gesticulated in front of the open window, the light of the setting sun fell warmly upon his sparkling eyes and contracted features. His comrade, leaning against the sash saw that distorted face and wondered at the cause of his strange agitation.

"I? Have not been frank! Naturally I did not proclaim from the house tops that I loved Mlle. Vincart, but I would have told you sooner had you asked me. I am not sly; but you, with all respect to you, are walled up like a subterranean passage. One can not guess the nature of your thoughts. I almost thought that you were interested in Reine, but you never gave me an opportunity after the thought occurred to me, to explain to you."

Julien maintained silence. He had seated himself near the table, his elbows resting on the cloth, thinking over Claudet's words. His hand was over his eyes, he bit his lips, a painful struggle seemed to be taking place within him. After a pause Julien raised his head slightly and said to Claudet in a low voice like a confessor questioning a penitent:

"Does Reine know that you love her?"

"I think she suspects it," said Claudet, "but I have never dared to declare it openly. But girls are very sharp—especially Reine. They divine very quickly that love is in the question

when a young man is constantly around them."

"So you see her often?"

"Not as often as I should like to. But, you know, when two people take the same road, they often meet—at the beech-nutting, in the field, at the door of the church. It is not necessary, as you think, to appoint meetings in the fields at night. Reine has too much respect for herself to meet a lover at night, besides she has other things to do, being very busy at the farm since her father's illness."

"Well—do you think she loves you?" Julien asked with nervous irritation.

"I don't know," replied Claudet, shrugging his shoulders. "She trusts me and is kind to me, but I have not dared to ask her if she loves me other than a friend. You see, I have good reasons for not breaching the subject; she is rich, and I am poor, and for nothing in the world would I have her think that I am courting her for her money."

Just the same, you wish to marry her, and you hope that she will not say no," cried Julien angrily.

Claudet, struck by his compnaion's violent manner, drew near him.

"How you talk, M. de Buxieres," he exclaimed. "One would think this matter vexed you. Shall I tell you a thought that has occurred to me before and which recurs to me as I listen to you? It is that perhaps you are in love with the 'Queen of the Woods' yourself."

"I?" protested Julien. He was humiliated by Claudet's perspicacity. He had too much pride and respect to allow his unhappy passion to be seen by a preferred rival. He paused a moment to swallow something which rose in his throat and to steady his voice before adding:

"You know I have an aversion to women. Besides, I am not silly enough to expose myself to their wiles. You may rest assured, I will not enter the lists against you."

Claudet shook his head with a dissatisfied air.

"You doubt it," continued Buxieres; "Well, I will prove it to you. You dare not propose because Reine is rich and you are poor? I will undertake to arrange things."

"I do not understand you," stammered Claudet, amazed at the strange turn the conversation had taken.

"You will understand," said Julien with a decided gesture.

He had taken one of those resolutions which at first seem illogical and absurd, but which are common to timid minds. The suffering caused by Claudet's disclosures was of so acute a character that he was alarmed by it. He perceived with affright the ravages exercised by a hopeless love, and in his grief he employed a heroic remedy to stop the malady. He proposed to put an end to his love by hastening the marriage of Claudet and Reine.

When that thought first occurred to Julien, he seized upon it with the precipitation of a man who grasps the first object which seems to offer him a means of support, be that object a dead branch or a reed.

"Listen," said he. "At the first explanation we had, I told you that I did not intend to deprive you of your right to a portion of your

father's fortune. Up to the present you have depended upon my word and we have lived at the castle like two brothers. But the moment the question of money alone keeps you from marrying the woman you love, it is necessary that you should be legally provided for. Tomorrow we will go to M. Arbillot's and have him draw up the papers which will bestow your inheritance upon you. You will then, in the eyes of the law and of all, be **one of the best** matches in the district, and you can, without fear of being presumptuous or indelicate, propose for Mlle. Vincart's hand!"

Claudet was nonplussed. Emotion prevented him from speaking; tears glistened in his eyes.

"M. Julien," said he at length, in a low voice, "I do not know how to find words with which to thank you. I am stunned, and to think that I suspected you of being tired of me and of regretting your benefit! I judge others by myself. Beast that I am! But pardon me! If I do not express myself readily I feel deeply and all that I can tell you is that you make me very happy!"

He sighed deeply. "Provided now," he continued, "that Reine accepts me. Believe me if you will, M. de Buxieres, but as resolute and bold as I appear, I am like a chicken when near her. I am afraid she will not accept me and I do not know if I shall ever dare to propose to her."

"Why should she refuse you?" replied Julien sadly. "She knows that you love her. Do you think she loves another?"

"That I do not know. Although very frank, Reine does not wear her heart upon her sleeve, and with young girls, you know, one can never be sure. It is that which makes me fearful."

"If you are afraid," said Buxieres, "would you like me to undertake to deliver your proposal?"

"I wish you would render me that service. That will be another good deed, added to the others. I will repay them all together some day."

On the following day as agreed, Julien took Claudet to Auberive to M. Arbillot's, where the deed was drawn up, signed and sealed. After

which the two young men repaired to the inn to dine. The meal was short and eaten in silence. Neither seemed very hungry. When they had drunk their coffee, they set out for Vivey, but when they reached a large lime tree which stood at the entrance to the forest, Julien lightly touched Claudet's shoulder.

'Here,' he said, "we are going to part company. You will go to Vivey alone and I will go to La Thuiliere through the meadows. Wait for me at the castle whither I will return when I have talked with Mlle. Vincart."

"The time will seem so long to me," sighed Claudet. "I shall not know what to do with myself until your return."

"It will only be two or three hours. Sit at my chamber window, you will see me return. If I wave my hat it will inform you of my success."

Claudet pressed his hand, they separated and Julien descended toward the recently mowed fields where he walked beneath the trees. The afternoon heat was tempered by an east wind.

The young man walked along with feverish haste. The last trial to which he was about to submit his passion was at once sad and sweet. The thought of again seeing Reine and of sounding her heart was bitterly sweet to him.

He was about to speak to her of love for another, it was true, but he would put into that declaration made for another a little of his own tenderness and would have the supreme and cruel satisfaction of seeing her glances, her blushes, of receiving her avowal from her lips.

He would once more drink in her beauty and then he would leave her to bury himself at Vivey, after having interred his dreams and his worldly desires at La Thuiliere. As he courageously undertook that immolation of his youth, he felt a confused hope cross his mind.

Claudet was not sure of being loved and perhaps Reine would reply to his request with a refusal. Then the field would be clear.

The odor of the mint on the edge of the stream suggested to him vague dreams of happiness. Impatient to be near Reine Vincart

he hastened his steps, then halted, seized with a sudden fear. He had not met her since the painful scene at the cottage. What should he do if she refused to receive or listen to him?

Soon he saw the the roof of the farm a hundred paces ahead; he pushed open a gate and entered the court. The blinds were closed, the door shut and the house seemed deserted. Then Julien fancied that perhaps Reine had accompanied the farm-hands to the field and in his disappointment he stopped in the center of the court-yard in which the chickens were hunting food; at the sight of the intruder they fled precipitately through a gate which was half ajar, and through which they were followed by the young man into the garden proper.

At the end of a long arbor covered with vines he perceived Reine Vincart, seated on the steps of an arched door which led into the kitchen. A plum tree laden with purple fruit spread its branches over the head of the girl, who was shelling peas.



The sound of footsteps caused her to raise her head, but she did not stir. In his anxiety Julien thought the alley interminable. He had time to examine Reine, who imperturbably continued her work and threw the shelled peas into a measure. She was bareheaded and dressed in a striped petticoat and white waist, the upper button of which she had opened, owing to the heat. She had recognized Buxieres, but an emotion equal to his had rooted her to the spot and a secret feminine instinct had impelled her to continue her work in order to conceal the trembling of her fingers.

Since the adventure at the cottage she had often thought of Julien, of the bold kiss stolen by him which had brought a blush to her brow. Indignant as she had been at that caress, which implied a lack of respect not at all in keeping with Julien's habitual reserve, she was surprised to find that she was not more indignant. If at first the affront had aroused a feeling of anger, she remembered it later on with blissful pulsations of her heart. She thought that to have

thus lost all control over himself in her presence that timid man must have been carried away by the force of an irresistible passion, and there is no woman, be she ever so refined, who will not receive the homage rendered to the sovereign power of her beauty.

Julien's melancholy blue eyes had exercised a magnetic attraction over Reine's limpid, black ones and without asking to what it would lead, she felt for him a sentiment of tenderness, which bordered upon love.

Julien de Buxieres was not sufficiently versed in such matters to notice the impression which his unexpected appearance produced upon Reine Vincart. When he was several paces from her, he bowed awkwardly and she returned his salutation coldly. Then, very much disconcerted, he apologized for entering her house so unceremoniously.

"I fear," he said humbly, that after what has taken place, my visit will not be agreeable to you."

Reine, who had promptly recovered her self-



possession, pretended not to hear the remark which escaped M. de Buxieres. She rose, pushed out of the way the green leaves which strewed the path and answered briefly:

"You are forgiven, sir. One does not need anyone to usher them into La Thuiliere. I suppose that the motive which brings you here could only be pleasant." With those words she buttoned her jacket and straightened her skirt.

Certainly, mademoiselle,' stammered Julien; "a very serious motive brings me, and if I am not inconveniencing you—"

"Not at all, sir; but since you have something to say to me, it is needless for you to stand. Allow me to get you a chair."

She entered the house, leaving the young man surprised at the calmness with which she had received him. Shortly afterward she reappeared bringing a chair which she placed under the plum tree.

"Pray be seated, it is shady here."

She reseated herself on the step, her back

against the wall, her chin in one of her hands.

"I am listening," she murmured.

Julien, gradually obtaining the mastery over himself, saw that his mission was more difficult than he had thought it. He felt strangely embarrassed. He began by inquiring as to the health of M. Vincart.

"He is always the same," said Reine, "neither better nor worse, and with his disease all that I can expect is that he will remain thus a long time. But," she continued, with a tinge of sarcasm, "it was sure not to inquire about my father that you came to La Thuiliere?"

"That is true, mademoiselle," he said; "that of which I have to speak is very delicate. Pardon me, therefore, if I hesitate and am somewhat embarrassed. I pray you to be indulgent."

"What is he about to say?" wondered Reine, while her heart throbbed faster.

Julien proceeded as all timid people do. After having prepared the speech he was to make, he lost his self-possession and said bluntly:

"Mlle. Reine, do you ever think of marrying?"

Reine started and looked at him in surprise.

"I?" she exclaimed. "Oh, I have time; I am in no hurry." Then, casting down her eyes, she asked: "Why did you say that to me?"

"Because I know of some one who loves you—who would be delighted to marry you."

She turned very pale, seized a stalk of peas, mechanically twisted it between her fingers, and remained silent for a moment.

"Some one in the country?" she stammered.

"Yes, some one who knows you—some one who possesses the qualities I think to make a good husband, and enough money to support a wife. You have undoubtedly guessed whom I mean?"

She kept her eyes cast down; her lips were compressed, her features impassive, but the manner in which she crushed the peas between her fingers betrayed her emotion.

"I do not know," she replied.

"Is that so?" he cried in astonishment, but with secret satisfaction; "can you not guess? Have you never thought of the person I mean?"

"No—who is it?"

She raised her eyes to his, and through her half-open lids one could see a mysterious glow in her deep eyes.

"It is Claudet Sejournant," said Julien, in his turn lowering his eyes. The mysterious glow in the depths of Reine's liquid orbs vanished, and her face again became impassive—but Julien saw nothing.

The words he had just uttered had caused him too great a pang, and he dared not glance at his companion for fear of surprising upon her face a beam of joy occasioned by his suffering.

"Ah," said Reine coldly, "in that case, why did not Claudet come to make his own explanation? At the last moment he dared not venture, and—and," she added sarcastically, "you offered to speak for him."

"Yes, I promised him to plead his cause. I thought too that I should have no difficulty. Claudet has loved you a long time. He has a brave heart and is a fine fellow—and as to material advantages his position is now equal to yours. I have deeded to him a portion of his

father's fortune. What reply shall I take him?"

With an effort he uttered that speech not daring to raise his eyes to Mlle. Vincart. Reine did not speak. She was disconcerted by the unexpected proposal. She had certainly mistrusted that Claudet liked her, but she had never dreamed of encouraging that inclination. Claudet's proposal did not wound her; what hurt her was Julien's intervention—his taking up of his relative's cause. That same M. de Buxieres, who had so boldly shown his preference for her in the colliers' cottage, considered it quite natural to become Claudet's advocate. She felt scorned, humiliated, offended by the only man in whom her heart was interested. In the excess of her indignation she grew reckless; bitter disappointment, cruel indifference to all things, urged to extreme resolutions, and not being able to revenge herself upon any one, she felt as if she could injure herself.

"What reply shall I take to Claudet," repeated Julien, concealing beneath affected coldness the emotion which was breaking his heart. She

rose, turned her large eyes upon him and asked bluntly:

"What would you advise me to reply?"

If Julien had been less of a novice, he would have known that a maiden who loves never asks such a question; but the feminine heart was to him a sealed book. He imagined that the young girl asked that question as a subterfuge in order to save herself an avowal of her preference. She undoubtedly desired his aid, and he felt obliged to accord her that satisfaction.

"I think," he murmured, "that Claudet will make a good husband and that you will do well to choose him."

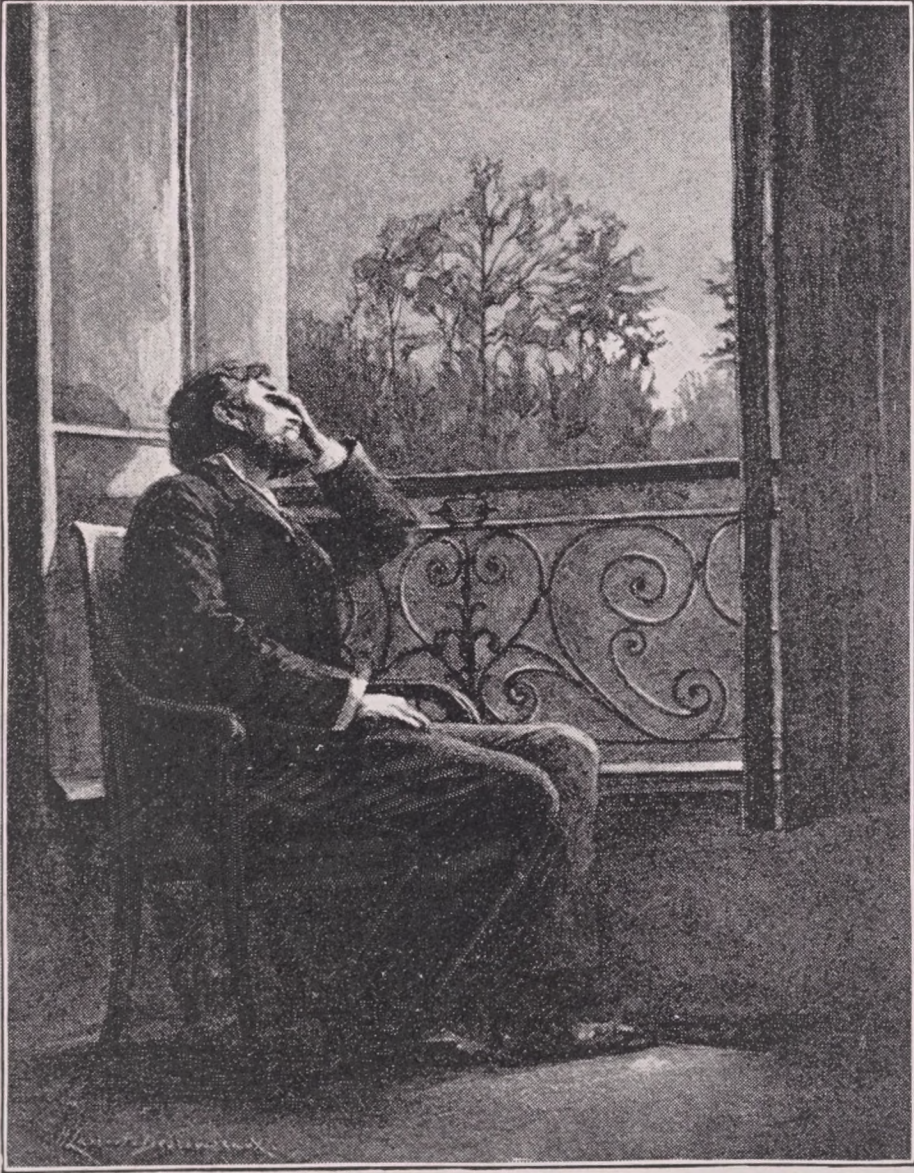
Reine bit her lips and her pallor redoubled. Her black eyes, in contrast, sparkled more brightly.

"Very well," she responded, "tell Claudet that I consent, and that he will be welcome at La Thuiliere."

"I will tell him at once."

Julien bowed to Reine who stood by mute and motionless.

"Adieu, mademoiselle."



Brusquely he turned his back upon her and fled across the fields. She maintained her statue-like position until the young man's footsteps died away; then she bowed her head upon her hands and burst into sobs and tears.

Julien de Buxieres, dissatisfied with himself, irritated by the prompt success of his embassy, dreaded returning to Vivey. He then recalled the promise he had given Claudet; faithful to his word, although his heart was filled with anguish, as he came in sight of the castle, he raised his hat and with a mournful gesture waved it over his head three times. At the signal which announced good news, Claudet replied by a triumphant cry, then he disappeared from his post at the window.

A moment later, Julien heard the sound of footsteps approaching; it was the lover coming to meet him, impatient to learn the details of the interview.

VII.

If Julien had thought that the marriage of Claudet and Reine would heal his wounds, he soon discovered that he was mistaken.

When he had informed the "Great Huntsman" of the success of his undertaking, he found that he had imposed upon himself a surplus amount of suffering. Uncertainty was decidedly preferable to the sight of the joy manifested by his rival. It aroused his jealousy. Since receiving from Reine the avowal of her love for Claudet, he was more than ever possessed by that hopeless passion which threw him into a state of physical and mental exhaustion.

Reine was constantly before his eyes, as he had seen her on the steps of the farm in her short skirt and waist open at the neck. He saw the refractory, curly locks upon her brow, the pure glance of her limpid eyes, the expressive smile upon her lips, and he remembered with a

start that before a month was over, she would belong to Claudet. Then almost simultaneously, like a swallow which changes its course, his thoughts took another direction and he pictured what "might have been" if, instead of replying in the affirmative, Reine had objected to marrying the "Great Huntsman."

He fancied himself kneeling before her as before a madonna, acknowledging his love. He took her hands gently and talked to her so eloquently, that he won her. Her hands remained in his, he pressed her tenderly in his arms. He thought he could feel her supple form against his breast. Suddenly he awoke from his enchantment, found himself alone in his chamber and recalling the reality, he bit his lips.

The sound of footsteps resounded on the gravel, and a jovial voice smote upon his ear. It was Claudet on his way to La Thuiliere. Julien ground his teeth as he saw him disappear. What had he done that his life should be so disappointing? He had had no pleasure during his childhood, his youth was spent in a monastery,

until he was twenty-seven he had known neither love nor friendship. At one time, it was true, fortune had seemed to smile upon him by giving him a little money and liberty, but her smile was ironical. His religious belief seemed to have given way under the same blow which had shaken to their foundations his hopes of love; he seemed to have been led astray and to have no longer a pilot nor a port.

Gradually he took a dislike to his home and passed entire days in the woods which became his refuge. Under the shade of the venerable trees, amid the silent obscurity of the beeches, he felt less lonesome, less humiliated, and disenchanted. On his return from that haunt he often met Claudet on the door-step; at such times he would glance eagerly into his face to see what success he had met with. His curiosity was seldom satisfied, for Claudet seemed to have left all his spirits and his animation at La Thuiliere.

At meals he scarcely spoke. Julien, provoked by that unexpected discretion mentally accused his cousin of practicing dissimulation and of try-



ing to hide his happiness from him. He was so blinded by jealousy that he ascribed the "Great Huntsman's" silence to hypocrisy.

Claudet although delighted at the turn affairs had taken felt too, in his case, that "the course of true love did not run smooth," and that no one ever enjoys perfect happiness. After Julien's return, he hastened to La Thuiliere with throbbing pulses; Reine received him cordially, but he was surprised to find in that welcome an indescribable sense of dreaminess, little in accord with the idea usually formed of the first interview between lovers.

When he attempted to demonstrate his love in the usual rustic manner, that is, by boisterous embraces and resounding kisses, Reine said:

"Be calm and let us talk sensible."

He obeyed, resolving, however, to return to the charge and to triumph over that modest reserve. In fact, the next day he made another attempt but was repulsed with equal firmness. He complained gently and reproached Reine for not loving him as she should.

"If I did not feel kindly toward you," replied the girl laconically, "would I have permitted you to speak to me of marriage?" Then noticing his disappointment and thinking that she had perhaps treated him with too much harshness, she said in a tender tone:

"Remember, Claudet, that I am, so to speak, alone at the farm. That compels me to be more reserved than a girl who could have her mother with her. Do not be vexed then if I am not just like other girls; you may feel assured that will not prevent me from being a good wife when we are married."

"Yes that is one reason," thought the 'Great Huntsman,' as he returned to Vivey. "However, it is my opinion that a caress now and then would do no harm."

It can easily be understood that he did not care to state those details to Julien. His pride was wounded. Having always been the village beau, he was very little flattered by his poor success with the only maid he had ever seriously desired to conquer. He therefore maintained

silence and hid his discomposure beneath a mask of indifference. Moreover, a rustic instinct of prudence rendered him circumspect. He thought only of hastening the day when all obstacles would be overcome and Reine would belong solely to him. But when he broached the subject to Mlle. Vincart, he was discouraged to find her less anxious than he was.

"There is no hurry," replied she; "our affairs are not in order, the harvesting is not all done and we had better wait."

During the first moments of bliss, Claudet wished to announce his betrothal at once to all the village. Reine opposed it; she wished to avoid arousing public curiosity so long a time in advance and she drew from Claudet the promise not to say anything until the day for the marriage was set. For a month matters continued thus. To Julien de Buxieres that prolonged engagement, that continual coming and going from the castle to the farm, even Claudet's mysterious manner became a subject of bitterness and pain. He would have liked to put an end to it

quickly and to have the sacrifice consummated without delay. He hoped that when once the young couple were installed at La Thuiliere the thought that Reine belonged to another would suffice to cure him radically and to chase away the phantoms of love which haunted him.

One evening when Claudet entered more silent and dull than was his custom, Julien asked him bluntly:

"Well, how are you getting on? When is the wedding to be?"

"Nothing is settled yet," evasively replied Claudet; "we have plenty of time."

"Indeed," exclaimed Buxieres, sarcastically, "you seem very patient for a lover."

The remark and the tone in which it was made piqued the "Great Huntsman."

"The delay is not my fault," he replied.

"Ah," murmured his companion, "it is Mlle. Vincart's?" At the same time his eyes brightened as if Claudet's reply had awakened a ray of hope in his heart. The latter noticed the lighting up of his cousin's eyes and hastened to reply:



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"No; we both thought it would be wiser to postpone the marriage until after the harvest."

"You made a mistake; a marriage should not be delayed. Moreover, though that protracted courtship, those daily visits to the farm are all proper enough, they compromise Mlle. Vincart. You should know they do."

Julien spoke with an unusual violence which seemed strange to Claudet.

"Then," he asked, "you think matters should be hastened and that the marriage should take place before winter?"

"Certainly."

The following day at La Thuiliere, Claudet said to Reine who was spreading pieces of cloth upon the grass:

"Reine, I think we ought to decide upon the day for our marriage."

She placed upon the ground the watering-pot with which she was sprinkling the linen and looked at her betrothed uneasily:

"I thought we had agreed to wait until after

the harvesting. Why have you brought up the subject again?"

"It is true that I promised not to urge you, but I can not help it if I find the time long. Moreover no one in the country knows of our intentions, and to see me coming to the farm every day will give them cause for gossip and make it unpleasant for you. That is M. de Buxieres' opinion, I talked with him about it last night."

At Julien's name Reine's black brows contracted and she bit her lips.

"Ah," she muttered between her teeth, "he has been giving you advice?"

"Yes, he thinks the sooner we are married, the better it will be."

"What does it concern him," she exclaimed angrily. She turned away her eyes and for a moment gazed pensively at a roll of linen at her feet. Then she shrugged her shoulders, shook her head and avoiding Claudet's languishing eyes, she said slowly:

"Perhaps you are both right! Let it be so! I give you permission to seek the priest, to tell

him of our engagement and to fix upon the day with him."

"Thank you, Reine," cried Claudet triumphantly; "you have made me very happy."

He seized her hands, but, although he was rejoiced, he could not help remarking that the young girl trembled. It even seemed to him that Reine's eyes looked somewhat tearful.

On leaving his betrothed, he hastened to the priest, whose dwelling was near the castle. The servant conducted him into a small garden which was separated from the cemetery by a high wall. Claudet found Abbe Pernot seated on a stone bench shaded by an arbor of vines. He was busy cutting sprigs of hazel.

"Good-evening, Claudet," said the priest, without discontinuing his labor; "you have surprised me at my work. If you have no objections I will continue, for I wish to finish to-night. You know the season is advancing! How is M. de Buxieres? I hope he will be as kind as his deceased cousin, and allow me to stretch my nets on the outskirts of his woods. But," he added, seeing the im-

patient expression upon Claudet's face, "I forgot to ask you to what good luck I owe this visit. Excuse me."

"Certainly. Do not mention it, sir. You have guessed aright. It is a happy circumstance which brings me here. I am going to get married."

"Ha! ha!" replied the abbe laughing. "My congratulations, my dear friend. That is indeed good news. It is not good for man to live alone, and I am glad to see you renounce a life of celibacy. Come, tell me quickly the name of your intended. Do I know her?"

"Very well, sir. It is Mlle. Vincart."

"Reine!"

The abbe let fall his twig, and raised a surprised face, while his lips formed themselves into a pucker of consternation.

"Yes, Reine Vincart," repeated Claudet, somewhat vexed by the priest's manner. "Does my choice astonish you?"

"Pardon me—and is it settled?" stuttered the abbe in confusion. "You—you love one another?"

"Of course. I have come to see you about the publication of the bans."

"Hem! So soon!" murmured the priest in his agitation buttoning and unbuttoning his cassock. "It seems to me you are very quick about it. The union of a man and woman—hem—is a serious act which should not be lightly entered upon. That is why the church instituted the sacrament of marriage. Have you reflected well?"

"Certainly I have reflected," replied Claudet, beginning to be irritated, "and you can see that I have decided. Once more, sir, let me ask you, does my choice displease you; have you anything to say against Mlle. Vincart?"

"I? No, nothing. Reine is an excellent girl."

"Well, what then?"

"Well, my friend, to-morrow I will go to see your betrothed and we will talk it all over together. I will act in the interests of all, of that you may be certain. In the meanwhile, I will include you in my prayers to-day. Good evening, Claudet, I will see you shortly!"

With those last enigmatical words he took

leave of Claudet who returned to the castle furious and uncomfortable, at the same time, at that singular reception.

When Claudet was gone Abbe Pernot, leaving his nets, walked nervously up and down one of the garden paths. He seemed to be entirely unhinged. He walked quickly, then he stopped, crossed his arms and uncrossed them, to put his hands in the pockets of his cassock which he tugged at feverishly, as if he wished to find a solution of his difficulties there. From time to time he sighed and these uncompleted sentences, escaped from his full lips:

“Lord, Lord! what a business! I cannot, however, say anything to Claudet! It is a secret which does not belong to me! Tut! Tut! Tut!”

Those last words were like the chirping of a startled blackbird; after having uttered them, the abbe recommenced his walk up and down the alley bordered with box. He continued pacing to and fro until twilight crept on and the Angelus had rung, when Augustine, the servant, came to tell him that he was awaited at the church.

He repaired thither in an absent frame of mind and uttered the prayers with a haste which did not contribute to the edification of the parish.

On his return to the parsonage, he supped without any appetite, muttered a grace and sought the room which served him as a study. He remained there long into the night, examined his small collection of books in order to find two which treated of "cases of conscience," and then began to read them by his dim lamp-light. During their perusal he uttered frequent sighs and only suspended his work to take copious pinches of snuff. Finally he felt that his eyes smarted, that his thoughts were confused, that his lamp had burned low and he decided to retire. But he slept badly and arose at day-break to say mass. He officiated more slowly and more piously than usual. Then he re-entered the sacristy, took off his priestly robes, entered the parsonage by means of a corridor communicating with the church, lunched, put on his three-cornered hat, took a stout cane and started out.

Augustine, surprised at his sudden exit, looked

to see which road he took and murmured:

"Monsieur is going to La Thuiliere!"

Her curiosity being in part satisfied she went about her daily duties.

Yes, Abbe Pernot was on his way to La Thuiliere. Never, during the twenty-five years of his ministry had a question so knotty burdened his conscience. The case was grave and in addition to that, so urgent that the abbe was taken unawares. How was it that such thoughts had not occurred to him? A more ardent priest, a priest more attentive to his flock, would certainly have been better posted! But he had indulged so much in worldly amusements, that his mind was preoccupied, his powers of perception dimmed. He took himself thus to task upon the way and wondered what he should say on reaching the farm and how he should break the ice. Occasionally even he asked himself: "Have I the right to speak? What a revelation, and to a young girl, too! Lord, Lord, guide me in the right path and instruct me with Thy truth."

As he piously repeated that verse from the

Psalms to give him strength, he saw the gray roofs of La Thuiliere before him. He heard the cocks crow and the cows low in the stable. Five minutes later he pushed open the door of the kitchen where Margaret was arranging the dishes for breakfast.

"Good day, Margaret," said the abbe in a low voice; "has Mlle. Vincart arisen?"

"Holy Virgin, sir! Certainly my mistress is up! She rose before any of us and is already in the orchard. I will fetch her—"

"No, do not stir. I know the way, I will go in search of her myself."

In the orchard! That suited Abbe Pernot first-rate; it seemed to him that a conversation there would be less painful and that the sight of the trees would inspire him. He crossed the kitchen, descended the steps which led to the garden, walked along the paths and found Reine at the end of a grove of filbert trees.

At the sight of the priest, Reine turned pale for she felt assured that he came to inform her of the result of his conversation with Claudet

and to notify her as to the day chosen for the celebration of their nuptials. The thought that her fate was to be irrevocably sealed had troubled her all night and she had wept—that was evident by her inflamed eyelids.

The day before, that proposal accepted in a moment of anger, seemed to her a vague project, the realization of which was doubtful; but now all seemed cruelly certain—she could not escape from a promise which Claudet, alas, looked upon as binding.

All that recurred to Reine as she saw the priest advancing toward the filbert trees; she felt her heart contract and her eyes fill with tears.

She was too proud, however, to allow the priest to see her irresolution; she made an effort at self-control, conquered her weakness and addressing the abbe gayly, she said:

"Sir, I am sorry they allowed you to come hither. Let us return to the farm and I will give you a cup of coffee."

"No, my child," said the old man, making a gesture which bade her remain; "thank you. I

do not care for any; remain where you are. I have something to say to you and we will not be disturbed here."

Under the nut trees were two rustic seats; the priest took one and bade Reine take the other. Beneath the shade of those branches they were installed as in a confessional. The calm morning, the solitude invited confidence, but the priest and the young girl were both agitated and maintained an embarrassed silence. Reine was the first to speak:

"You have seen Claudet, sir?"

"Yes, yes," replied Abbe Pernot with a sigh.

"He—spoke to you of—our projects?" continued Reine, in a less steady voice; "have you fixed the day?"

"No, my child, nothing is fixed. I should have liked to have seen you beforehand and to have told you something very important."

The abbe paused, rubbed a splash of mud from his cassock, then coughed and continued in a voice prudently lowered:

"My dear child, I will begin by telling you

what I said to Claudet Sejournant yesterday:

Marriage, the indissoluble bond between a man and woman before God, is one of the most solemn, serious acts of life. Before engaging in such ties it is necessary as the Scriptures enjoin: "to sound one's heart," to submit one's mind to a serious examination. Therefore I beg of you to answer my questions without any false pride, as if you were at the confessional. Do you love Claudet?"

Reine started. That appeal to her sincerity reawoke all her perplexities and scruples. She raised her large tearful eyes to the priest and after a moment's hesitation replied:

"I am very fond of Claudet. I respect him very highly."

"I know," replied the priest, "but—excuse me if I insist. Was the engagement you entered into with him made for reasons of fitness or on account of a warmer feeling?"

"Pardon, sir," said Reine blushing, "it seems to me that friendship combined with the firm intention of being a faithful and devoted wife

would seem to you, as to me, sufficient reason."

"Certainly, certainly, my child. There are many husbands who are contented with less. But it is not a question alone of Claudet's happiness; it concerns yours too. Is your love for Sejournant so deep, that if, by some unforeseen circumstance, this engagement should be broken, you would be irremediably unhappy?"

"Ah," said Reine in confusion, "you ask too much, sir! If a rupture should occur and I have nothing with which to reproach myself, it is possible that I might be consoled!"

"That is well. Consequently you do not love Claudet, if you take the word 'to love' in a worldly sense. You do not love him with *love*. Eh? Tell me frankly!"

"No, sir."

"God be praised! We are saved!" cried the abbe, drawing a deep breath, while Reine in confusion stared at him.

"I do not understand you," she stammered, "what do you mean?"

"That that marriage is impossible!"

"Impossible, why?"

"Yes, as impossible in the eyes of the Church as in the eyes of the world."

The young girl looked at him with growing astonishment.

"You frighten me!" she murmured. "What has happened? What reasons could prevent my marriage with Claudet?"

"Important reasons, my daughter. I do not feel authorized to tell you but you may be sure that I am not speaking lightly and that you can depend upon my word."

Reine became pensive, her lips quivered, her eyes grew anxious.

"I have the greatest confidence in you, sir, but—"

"But you hesitate to believe me," interrupted the abbe wounded at not finding the blind confidence upon which he counted.

"You should, however, think that your pastor has no interest in deceiving you and that when he tries to influence you he has only your welfare in this world and the next in view."

"I do not doubt your good intentions," said Reine firmly, "but an engagement cannot be broken without some weighty reasons. I have given my word to Claudet and I am too honorable to retract it without telling him why I have done so."

"You will find a pretext."

"If Claudet could be satisfied with a pretext, my conscience would not be," objected the young girl, raising her frank, clear eyes to the priest's face. "Your words have made me uneasy. I cannot bear suspense nor half disclosures. You have considered it your duty to inform me that I cannot marry Claudet; now tell me why?"

"Why, why?" repeated the abbe, impatiently. "I would like to tell you, but I am not authorized to gratify your imprudent curiosity. You should be less proud of spirit and believe without any discussion!"

"In point of faith, that is impossible," said Reine, obstinately. "But my marriage has no connection with the truths of the church. I therefore insist respectfully upon being enlightened, sir, if not—"

"If not," exclaimed Abbe Pernot.

"If not, I will keep my word and wed Claudet."

"You would not do that!" he protested, clasping his hands. "After having been duly warned by me, you would not burden your soul with so terrible a responsibility. Does not the responsibility of committing a mortal sin alarm you, my child?"

"I cannot sin in ignorance, and as for my conscience, sir, do you think it is Christian-like to alarm it without explaining?"

"Is that your fixed determination?" asked the abbe.

"That is my fixed determination," she repeated vehemently.

"You are stubborn and proud," exclaimed the priest rising. "You force me to speak? Very well, I will, for evil would result from it and would fall upon you, but you must not reproach me for the sorrow I am about to cause you."

He paused a moment, clasped his hands, looked up at the interlaced branches of the trees and murmured as if he were in his oratory:

"Lord, you are a witness that I wished to turn this cup from her, but of two evils we must choose the lesser. If I fail in my duty of charity, consider, oh, God, that I do so to avoid a scandal; and deign to pardon your servant!"

He reseated himself, put one of his hands to his eyes and with Reine's eyes upon him, he commenced in a low voice:

"My child, you have compelled me to violate a secret which has been solemnly confided to me. It has to deal with matters which ordinarily one does not relate to young girls, but you are, I think, already a woman in heart and intellect and you will listen calmly to what I am about to tell you, although it will cause you pain. I have told you that your marriage with Claudet is impossible, and I add that it would be criminal, for Claudet is your brother; you had not the same mother, but the same father—Claude Oudart de Buxieres."

"You are mistaken; it is not so!"

"It is so! I am grieved, my daughter, to wound you by revealing to you a mistake made

by your mother which she atoned for, like King David, with tears of blood. She confessed it not to a priest, but to a friend, several days before her death. She was more sinned against than sinning. Her betrayer himself acknowledged that, in a letter he intrusted to me and which I have here."

The abbe drew from his pocket a letter, yellow with age and held it before Reine's eyes. In that note, written by Claude de Buxieres in response, no doubt, to his mistress' anxious reproaches, he in a manner apologized for his error and tried to calm Mme. Vincart's fears by promising her, as was his custom, to care for their child's future.

"That child was you, my poor girl," concluded the abbe, picking up the letter which Reine had cast aside after glancing at it.

The girl did not seem to have heard him. She had buried her face in her hands in order to hide the blush which mounted to her brow, and she did not move, so crushed was she by the disgrace of that revelation; at intervals, convul-



sive sobs shook her frame with great anguish.

"You can now understand," continued the priest, "how overcome I was on hearing of the project of your marriage. I could not confide in Claudet the cause of my stupefaction; I even hoped I would be understood by you upon hinting at the matter in order to spare you that cruel mortification; but you willed otherwise! Pardon me for imposing that cross upon you and bear it bravely, like a Christian."

"You did what was best," murmured Reine.

"Thank you, sir."

"Will you dismiss Claudet after to-day?"

"I will."

Abbe Pernot attempted to take her hand and to utter words of consolation, but she freed herself with a wild gesture and fled toward the house. When she entered the kitchen, she found it empty. The blinds had been partly closed—drawn on account of the sun—and a refreshing darkness reigned within the room. Upon the shelves, among the copper utensils hopped the magpie uttering shrill cries, and in his corner

among the colored pictures lay old Vincart, his eyes closed, his lips parted. As the door creaked on its hinges, he opened his eyes. He divined that it was Reine although he did not see her, and his pallid lips uttered their customary refrain:

"Reine! Rei-eine!"

Impetuously Reine ran toward the paralytic, knelt beside him and sobbing kissed his hands. Her caresses were more respectful, more humble and contrite.

"Oh, papa, papa!" she moaned. "I have loved you dearly; I shall now love you more than ever!"

VIII

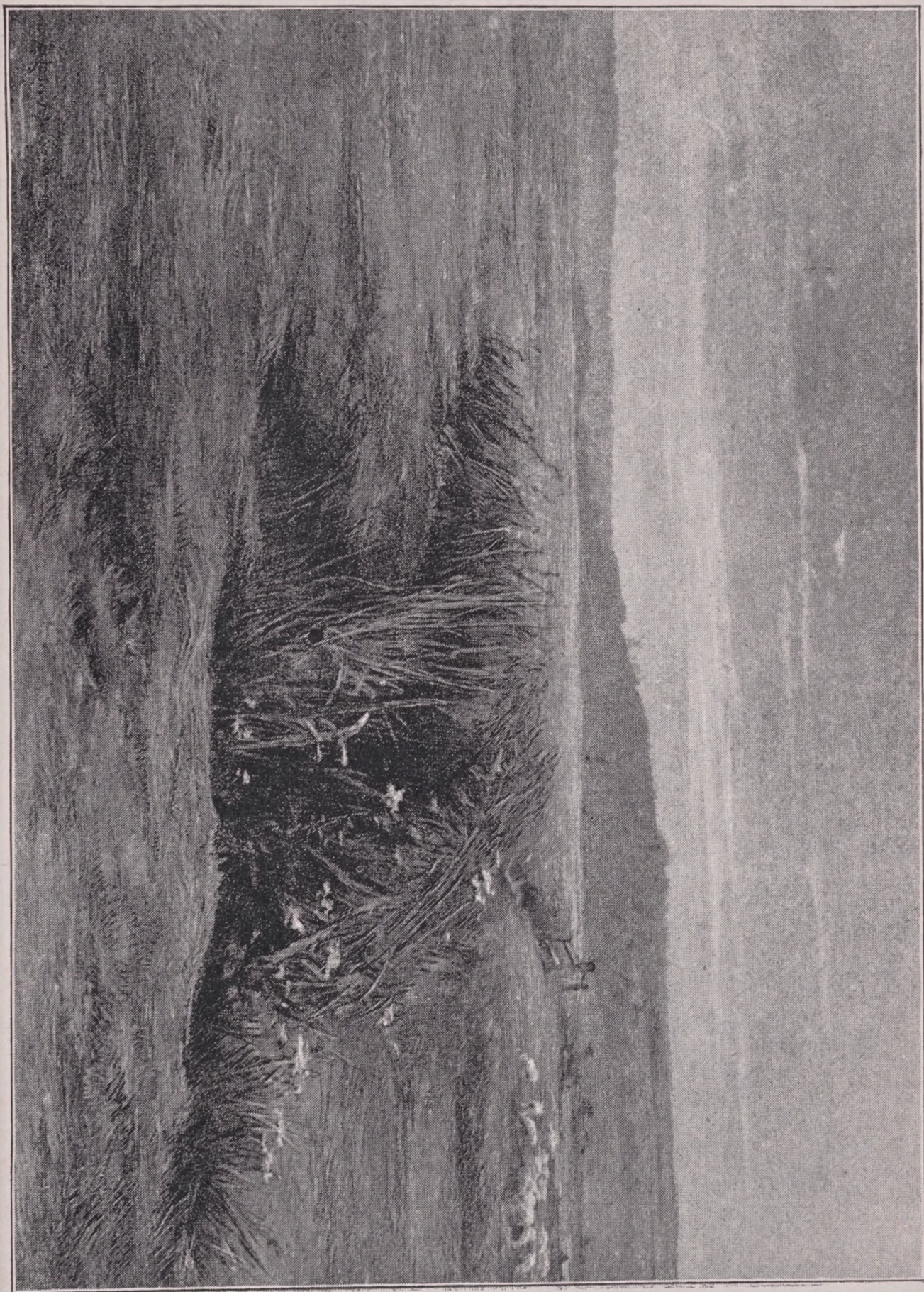
In the sunny kitchen Reine, caring for M. Vincart and her household, reflected upon the mortifying revelations made by Abbe Pernot. She knew that Claudet would come to the La Thuiliere to learn the result of the priest's visit; she did not feel sufficiently mistress of herself to have a decisive conversation with him at once, and she resolved to absent herself from the farm in order to gain at least a day. That delay seemed necessary to her that she might collect her thoughts and find some means of freeing herself from the Great Huntsman without his suspecting the true motive of that rupture. She bade Margaret say that unexpected work had called her away, and she set out for the woods of Maigrefontaine.

Every time that she had wished to form a resolution, the forest had been her refuge and her inspirer. Although humiliated, disgraced, in

the depths of her heart she felt a tremor of joy.

Upon closer examination she found out the cause: she knew that she was freed from her obligation to marry Claudet, and the prospect of regaining her liberty afforded her relief. During the past few weeks she had deeply regretted the impulse of anger which had forced her into that engagement. Her loyalty and sincerity suffered by the restraint imposed upon them; it had required such an effort on her part to meet her betrothed pleasantly without encouraging his too demonstrative tenderness, that the knowledge of her regained freedom awoke a sense of ease within her. But scarcely had that secret satisfaction possessed her than she reproached herself for not thinking of the sorrow she was about to cause Claudet.

Poor Claudet! what a trial awaited him! He was so artless and had such implicit faith in the success of his projects! Reine's heart was touched by one tender thought. As if she had divined the bonds which attached her to the Great Huntsman, she had loved him as a sister.



From childhood to the age at which they learned their catechism together on the church porch, a feeling of amicable good-fellowship had united them. With Reine that sentiment had remained friendship, but with Claudet it had ripened into love; and having allowed him to believe that his love was returned by her, she was to be forced to undeceive him. She tried to find a means which would help her to allay his pain, but she was unsuccessful. Claudet was too deeply in love to be satisfied with mere words; he would demand serious reasons, and the only one which would convince him was just the one the young girl could not disclose to him. She was destined to permit Claudet to leave her with the opinion that she had played the part of a heartless coquette.

In her distress Reine cast glances of despair upon the forest trees. She seemed to say to the beeches: "Inspire me!" To the roses by the wayside: "Teach me a secret with which to heal the wound I am about to inflict!" But the forest, which once had been her wisest counselor

and guide, remained deaf to her invocation.

Reine did not return to La Thuiliere until dusk. Margaret informed her that Claudet had awaited her part of the afternoon, and that he would return the following morning at nine o'clock.

Notwithstanding her bodily fatigue, Reine had difficulty in sleeping; her rest was disturbed by feverish dreams. As soon as she closed her eyes, she fancied she was talking with Claudet, and awoke with a start at the sound of his angry voice. At day-break she rose and went downstairs, in order to accomplish her early duties as quickly as possible; and when the clock chimed nine she went out and strolled along the road by which the Great Huntsman would come.

Soon she saw him advancing rapidly; her heart contracted, her hands grew cold, but she wrestled with the emotion that possessed her and approached Claudet bravely. When the latter was not more than fifty paces from her, he recognized Reine and exclaimed merrily:

"Ho, my queen! good morning; it was kind of you to come to meet me."

"Good morning, Claudet! I have come to meet you because I wish to speak to you of important matters, and I preferred that the conversation should not take place in the house. Shall we walk to *Planche au Vacher*?"

He halted, surprised at the proposition, as well as at the sorrowful, yet resolute manner of his betrothed. He examined her more closely, her eyes with their deep circles, her pale cheeks, and asked:

"What ails you, Reine? You are not as you usually are. Do you feel ill?"

"Yes—and no! I spent a miserable night pondering upon things which troubled me and which, I think, have given me a little fever!"

"What things? Do they concern us?"

"Yes," she replied, laconically.

Claudet began to be alarmed by the girl's mournful gravity. However, seeing that she quickened her steps with a pensive air, her head lowered, her brows contracted, her lips com-

pressed, he became timid, and dared not urge her to speak. They walked along thus in silence until they reached the plain.

"Let us stop here," said Reine, seating herself upon a stone; "we can talk without fear of interruption."

"To be sure," said Claudet with a forced smile. "With the exception of the herdsman of Vivey who occasionally passes by with his cattle, we shall not see very many people."

He tried to be cheerful, but in reality he was ill at ease.

"Have you a secret to tell me, Reine?" he continued.

"No," she replied, "but I know that my words will grieve you, my poor Claudet, and I would rather you should hear them in this remote spot."

"Explain yourself!" he cried. "For God's sake, do not keep me in suspense!"

"Listen, Claudet! When you proposed to me, I said 'yes' without taking time for reflection. But the more I think of our marriage, the more I am troubled by scruples. My father grows

daily worse, and with him in his condition I really have no right to live for any other but him. They say that he has divined our intentions, for since your visits he has grown more restless and suffering. I believe that any change in his habits would bring on a stroke; and I should never forgive myself for shortening his life. I feel that having him to care for, I cannot marry. On the other hand, I do not wish to abuse your patience. I therefore, beseech you to release me."

"That is to say you do not want to marry me!" he cried sadly.

"No, my poor Claudet, it only means that I do not wish to marry while M. Vincart lives, and that I cannot have you wait until I am free. Pardon me for having pledged my word so lightly and do not deprive me of your friendship on that account."

"Reine," the "Great Huntsman" interrupted vehemently, "do not trouble yourself to make me believe that it is night in the day-time. I am no child, and I know that M. Vincart's health is only a pretext. You do not wish to marry me,

that is the truth; you have changed your mind. The day before yesterday you told me to set the wedding-day with Abbe Pernot. Now that you have seen the priest, you wish to break off with me. I am curious to know what that miserable abbe can have said against me to cause you to change your mind."

Claudet recalled several of his mad pranks—meetings with sweethearts and so forth—and he suspected the priest of having reported them to Reine. "Ah," he continued, "if that rascal in the cassock has played me a trick."

"Rest assured," said Reine hastily, "that M. Pernot is, like me, your friend; he likes you very much and always speaks well of you to me."

"Indeed," sneered the young man, "since you both like me so much, how is it that you wish to break off our engagement just the day after your interview with the priest?"

Reine, knowing Claudet's impulsive nature, and wishing to prevent an altercation with the abbe, felt justified in resorting to a falsehood:

"M. Pernot," said she, "had nothing to do with

my resolution. He has not spoken against you and he is free from all blame."

"In that case, why do you not wish to marry me?"

"I repeat that my father's happiness must be consulted first. I do not want to marry as long as he needs me."

"Very well," obstinately replied Claudet, "I love you and I will wait."

"That cannot be."

"Why not?"

"Because," she expostulated, "because that would not be well for you, for my father, nor for me. Because long courtships never prove to be lucky."

"Those are poor reasons!" he muttered gloomily.

"Be they poor or not," replied the girl, "they seem reasons to me, and I will adhere to them."

"Reine," said he, approaching her and gazing fixedly into her eyes, "can you swear to me by your father that those are your reasons for rejecting me?"

She remained silent.

"You dare not swear," he exclaimed.

"My word should be sufficient," she stammered.

"No, it is not sufficient for me. But your silence tells its own story! You are too honest, Reine; you are not skilled in telling falsehoods. I have read the true reason in your eyes; it is that you do not love me."

She shrugged her shoulders and turned away her head.

"No, you do not love me. If you had any love for me, instead of discouraging me, you would give me a little hope and would bid me be patient. You have never loved me! I might have known it sooner but I tried to deceive myself. If you have any friendship for me, confess it!"

In the face of such persistence, Reine gradually lost her assurance. She no longer hesitated, for she knew that the avowal he required would be the only means of freeing herself from him!

"Well," she murmured, casting down her eyes, "since you force me to tell you the truth, which I wished to conceal from you, yes, you have

guessed it. I love you as a sister, that is all. I have determined that in order to marry, one must love differently; and I feel that my heart is not yours entirely."

"Yes," interrupted Claudet, bitterly, "it is some one else's."

"What do you mean? I do not understand."

"I mean that you love another!" he cried.

"It is not true!" Reine protested.

"You are blushing; a proof that I hit the mark! Enough!" he cried imperiously. "You are right. From the moment that you tire of me, I have no right to ask more. Adieu!"

He turned upon his heel. Reine, fearing she had been too harsh and not wishing to let him depart with so heavy a heart, detained him by placing her hand on his arm.

"Claudet," she besought, "do not let us part in anger! I am sorry to have given you pain and I regret having spoken so harshly. Give me your hand, the hand of good-fellowship, will you?"

But Claudet recoiled from her touch with a

wild gesture, casting an angry glance upon her.

"Thank you, for your pity," he said rudely; "I do not want it."

She knew that she had wounded him deeply, and insisted no longer but walked away with tearful eyes. For a time he remained motionless with folded arms, then he turned; he could see Reine's form indistinctly through the mist. He crossed the fields of Planche au Vacher. The heavy sky, the enshrouding mist harmonized with Claudet's mental condition.

"Another—she loves another!" thought he, "why did I not perceive that the first day?"

Then he remembered Reine's startled manner when he solicited a caress; he recalled her request that their engagement should remain secret, her eagerness to defer their marriage when he pressed her to fix the date. It was evident that she had only accepted him at the instance of Julien de Buxieres.

Julien! Might he not perchance be the rival in possession of Reine's heart? But if she had loved M. de Buxieres, by reason of what caprice



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or of what inconsistency would she have accepted the advances of another suitor?

"What part had Julien played through it all?" he asked himself. "Does M. de Buxieres know that Reine loves him, and does he love her? With a man as uncommunicative and mysterious as my cousin, it is not easy to discover the hidden workings of his mind. At any rate I have nothing to complain of; since divining my love for Reine, not content with keeping in the background, he offered to be my ambassador. Yet, there must be something wrong; I shall find it out."

At that moment through the fog he heard the chime of the bells at Vivey. Already eleven o'clock; how time flies even when one is troubled!

He continued on his way to the castle and without waiting to reply to Manette's questions, he entered the room in which lunch was to be served. Claudet's sudden entrance caused Julien, who was in the room, to start. He observed his cousin's shortness of breath and changed appearance.

"Eh, eh," he exclaimed sarcastically, "what is your hurry? Have you come at last to tell me that your wedding-day is fixed?"

"No," replied Claudet briefly. "There will be no wedding."

Julien started again, and stopping in front of his cousin, he said:

"What; are you joking?"

"I am not in a jesting mood. Reine no longer cares for me and she has broken her engagement."

As he uttered those words, he watched Julien's face; he saw the contracted features relax, and in his eyes glowed the same happy light which he had noticed a few days before when he had told him of the, to him, incomprehensible delay required by Reine.

"What has caused this singular change?" stammered Buxieres. "What reasons did Mlle. Vincart give in explanation?"

"The condition of M. Vincart's health and her desire to remain with him. You know of course, that I take those excuses for what they are worth.



The cause of her refusal is more serious and mortifying."

"You know it then?" exclaimed Julien impatiently.

"I know it, for I finally forced Reine to confess it."

"What is it?"

"That she does not love me."

"Reine—does not love you!"

Again the young man's eyes sparkled. Claudet leaned against the table facing his cousin; he continued to look him straight in the eyes:

"That is not all. Not only does Reine not love me, she loves another."

Julien changed color, the blood rushed to his cheeks, brow and ears; he bent his head.

"Did she tell you so?" he asked faintly.

"No, but I guessed it. Her heart is won and I think I know who has it."

Claudet articulated those last words slowly, laboriously. At the same time he stared into Julien de Buxieres' face with redoubled curiosity. The latter grew more and more confused.

"Whom do you suspect?" he stammered.

"Oh," replied the "Great Huntsman," recurring to a rustic ruse in order to penetrate the obscure depth of his cousin's heart more readily, "some one whom it is useless for me to name to you, for you do not know him."

"A stranger!"

Julien's countenance changed again. His hands trembled nervously, he compressed his lips and his eyes flamed that time, not with satisfaction, but anger.

"Yes, a stranger; a clerk at the iron works at Grancey, I think," evasively replied Claudet.

"You think, you think," exclaimed Julien, irritably. "Why are you not better posted before you accuse Mlle. Vincart of such treason?"

He recommenced pacing the floor, while his companion remained motionless and silent, his eyes fastened upon him.

"It is not possible," Julien continued; "Reine could not have deceived us both thus! When I spoke to her of your wish to marry her, it would

have been so easy to have told me that she loved somebody else!"

"She had probably," said Claudet, shaking his head, "reasons for not telling you."

"What reasons?"

"She undoubtedly thought then that the man she preferred did not care for her. I fancy that Reine only accepted me because she had no one better. Later on, as she is too frank to dissimulate long, she dismissed me."

"And," interrupted Julien, "you who were her accepted lover, did not stand up for your rights; you allowed yourself to be evicted by a rival of whose intentions you are not even certain!"

"I was forced to it! To marry a girl against her will is to run a great risk. From the moment another is preferred to me, I have nothing more to say—I retire."

"And you call that love!" cried Buxieres. "You call that being seriously in love! Great heavens, had I been in your place I should have acted differently! Instead of abandoning the field, I would have remained near Reine; I would

have surrounded her with my love. My passion would have expressed itself with so much force that its flame would have passed into her heart, and I would have compelled her to love me! Ah, if I had believed—if I had dared, all would have been different!"

He spoke in disconnected sentences, with wild excitement. He did not weigh his words nor seem to remember that any one was present. Claudet looked at him with a gloomy air and thought with poignant resignation:

"I have gauged you now and I know what is in your heart."

Manette, who brought in the lunch, interrupted their conversation and they were obliged to assume an indifferent air. In her presence both men preserved a prudent reserve. They ate in silence, but when the cloth was once removed and they were alone, Julien, pushing back his chair and casting an indefinable glance upon Claudet, murmured:

"Well, what have you decided on?"

"I will tell you to-morrow," replied the Great

Huntsman briefly. He left the dining-room abruptly, informed Manette that he would not return until late, and crossed the fields, followed by his dog. He took his gun, but he allowed the hares to decamp without aiming at them.

He thought over his conversation with his cousin. The situation seemed more clear to him. Julien loved the Queen of the Woods and struggled vainly against that passion. For what reason did he conceal his love? What was evident was that in despite of his prejudices of rank and of his pusillanimity, Julien loved Mlle. Vincart with a concentrated and ardent passion. As for Reine, Claudet was more and more persuaded that she was secretly in love, although she had denied it. But who was her choice? The Great Huntsman knew that there could be no serious rival other than his cousin de Buxieres. No village swain nor youth from the neighboring boroughs had ever courted M. Vincart's daughter and Julien possessed enough qualities to please Reine.

Claudet assured himself that if he had been a

girl he would never have chosen Julien for a lover; but women for the most part have tastes which men cannot understand. Julien's sensitive nature, his timidity and reserve might have charmed that strange girl. She loved him, had loved him for some time probably, only as she was very bright, she might have divined that Buxieres would never marry her, because their rank was not the same. Later on, on seeing him whom she loved plead the cause of another, her pride had revolted, and she had cast herself at the first comer as if to punish herself for the disdain of the only man she had taken notice of. Thus with that lucid intuition which came from the heart, Claudet concluded by disentangling the truth.

At length he rose and went to sup—or to pretend to sup—at the same inn at which he had lunched with Julien and from which the latter had set out on his ambassade to Reine. That remembrance alone would have sufficed to spoil his appetite. He did not remain at the table long. He was restless and set out for Vivey.

When he arrived at the castle, all were in bed. Noiselessly, with Montagnard at his heels, he crept up to his room, and worn out by fatigue, he fell into a heavy sleep. The following morning his first visit was to Julien who was nervous and feverish, having passed a bad night. Claudet's revelations once more unbalanced his mind and planted fresh thorns of jealousy in his breast.

On hearing of the broken engagement, he had at first experienced a selfish feeling of joy, and hope had reawakened; but the thought of Mlle. Vincart's probable affection for an unknown lover had sobered him sadly. He was angry at Reine's duplicity and Claudet's cowardly resignation. He was seized with violent paroxysms of rage; he was tempted to go in search of the young girl, to reproach her for what he called her "lack of faith," then to cast himself at her feet and to avow his own passion. But his diffidence rapidly triumphed over those brief flickerings of audacity. The minute analysis to which he submitted the workings of his mind, gradually disaccustomed him to act.

It was in that state that Claudet surprised him. When the door opened, Julien raised his head and cast a doleful glance at his cousin.

"Well?" he asked languidly.

"Well," began Claudet, "on thinking over what has taken place during the past month, I have discovered one thing of which I was doubtful."

"Of which you were doubtful?" repeated Buxieres.

"I will tell you. You remember the first conversation we had together with regard to Reine? I suspected you of being in love with her."

"I do not remember it," murmured Julien with a blush.

"In that case, my memory is better than yours, M. de Buxieres. To-day my suspicions have become certainty. You do love Reine Vincart."

"I?" Julien attempted to protest.

"Do not deny it. Rather confide in me; your confidence will not be misplaced. You love Reine and have loved her some time. You have succeeded in hiding it from me, but yesterday I

made the discovery. Now, dare to say anything to the contrary!"

Julien had covered his face with one of his hands. After a moment's silence, he replied sullenly:

"And if it were so? Of what avail would it be since Reine loves another?"

"That is another thing. Reine does not care for me, and I think indeed that she is in love with some one else. But, to be candid, the clerk at Grancey was a lover of my invention; she never dreamed of him."

"Then," cried Buxieres impetuously, "why that falsehood?"

"Because I played false in order to learn the truth. Pardon me—but I succeeded in finding out that which you took such pains to conceal."

"I concealed it—yes, I concealed it! Was I not right, as I was convinced that Reine loved you?" said Julien in a suffocated voice, as if the avowal choked his utterance. "I thought I would not allow my feelings to be seen by people who cared nothing about them."

"You were wrong," replied poor Claudet with a deep sigh; "if you had spoken, I fancy you would have been better received than I, and you would have saved me a great blow."

He uttered those words in a tone so impregnated with sadness that Julien, notwithstanding the selfish thoughts with which he was absorbed, was moved by it. Under the influence of that impulse he was on the point of confessing without reticence the deep love he bore Reine Vincart; but the long habit of keeping everything to himself was too inveterate for him to become suddenly communicative; he experienced a modest repugnance to laying bare his heart and he contented himself with murmuring:

"You do not love her then any longer?"

"I? Oh, yes! To be refused by the only woman I have ever wished to marry is a heavy blow to me. I am so disheartened that I feel as if I should like to leave the country. By going away I might perhaps do you a good turn and that thought would console me somewhat. You have treated me as a friend, M. de Buxieres,

and it is a matter I cannot forget. I have not the means of repaying your kindness, but it seems to me that I shall feel less grieved at going away if I can think that my departure will leave the road free for you to return to La Thuilliere."

"You are going to leave Vivey on my account?" exclaimed Julien.

"Not alone on your account, rest assured. If Reine had loved me, I should never have dreamed of making a like sacrifice. But Reine does not care for me. I am of no use here—except to annoy you!"

"That is absurd! Where would you go?"

"Oh, I am not particular. I might for example, become a soldier. Why should I not? I am a good walker and a good shot; I am qualified for a military life. It is a profession I like, and I may win my spurs as others have done. In that manner, M. de Buxieres, matters will be arranged to every one's satisfaction."

"Claudet," stammered Julien, sobs almost choking his utterance, "you are better than I!"

He rushed toward the "Great Huntsman," pressed him to his breast and embraced him affectionately.

"I do not wish you to expatriate yourself on my account," he continued. "Commit no inconsiderate act, I beseech you."

"Rest assured," replied Claudet laconically, "if I decide it will not be hastily."

For some time he had entertained the project of departing. Daily his position at Vivey became more insupportable; without saying anything to anyone, he had gone to Langres and had consulted an officer of his acquaintance on the subject of the necessary preliminaries with regard to enrollment. Finally one morning he resolved to set out for the military division to sign his engagement. He did not, however, wish to consummate that sacrifice without seeing Reine Vincart once again. In the depths of his heart he retained a vague hope, the sole bond which attached him to his native soil.

Instead of following the Vivey road, he struck out for La Thuiliere and reached the plain from

which one could see the roof of the farm and the castle towers. There he paused, his heart failed him. He was only a few paces from the farm, yet he hesitated to enter; not because he feared an unkind reception, but because he was afraid that he might lose his courage and be unmanned for his departure.

He leaned against the trunk of an old pear tree and looked at the landscape.

One feature in particular impressed Cluadet; the fields and the woods presented the same lights and shadows as upon that afternoon of the preceding year when he had met Reine in the forest several days before Julien's arrival.

The same soft light shed its radiance upon the wild cherry trees, the tomtits and robins chirped among the branches and he could hear the beech-nuts fall upon the gravel walks; things would be just the same when he, Claudet, was gone. There would only be one man less on the village streets, one huntsman lacking when hunting began in the forests of Charbonniere. The thought of how little importance man was upon earth and

of the ease with which he could be forgotten, unconsciously helped the "Great Huntsman" to become more resigned and he decided to enter La Thuiliere.

Just as he was going into the court, he met Reine who was going out. The girl fancied he had come to make another attempt to change her resolution. She dreaded a renewal of the painful scene which had closed their last interview and her first impulse was to place herself upon the defensive. She frowned and looked coldly and inquiringly at Claudet, as if to keep him at a distance. But the sadness upon her brother's face filled her with pity. She prudently concealed her emotion; she endeavored to assume the cordial tone of by-gone days.

"Good morning, Claudet," she said, "you have come opportunely. Fifteen minutes later you would not have found me here. Will you come in and rest a moment?"

"Thank you, Reine," he murmured, "I do not wish to detain you. Only I am sorry I was so angry the other day. You are right, we must



not part in anger and—as I am going away—for a long time—I wish to offer you the hand of good fellowship before leaving.”

“You are going away?”

“Yes, I am going to be a soldier, and egad! one knows when one goes away, but one does not know when one will return! That is why I wish to bid you adieu and to make peace in order not to depart with too heavy a heart.”

Reine felt the remainder of her coldness evanesce. The man who was going away on her account had been her playmate in childhood—was indeed her nearest relative. Her throat closed, her eyes filled with tears. She turned away her head, and that he might not observe her agitation she hastily opened the kitchen-door and said:

“Come in, Claudet, we can talk better in the house; and you will take some refreshment before setting out, will you not?”

He obeyed her and followed her into the house. She went herself in quest of a bottle of old wine, brought two glasses and filled them with an unsteady hand.

"Shall you remain in the service long?" she asked.

"I have engaged for seven years."

"You have chosen a life of hardship."

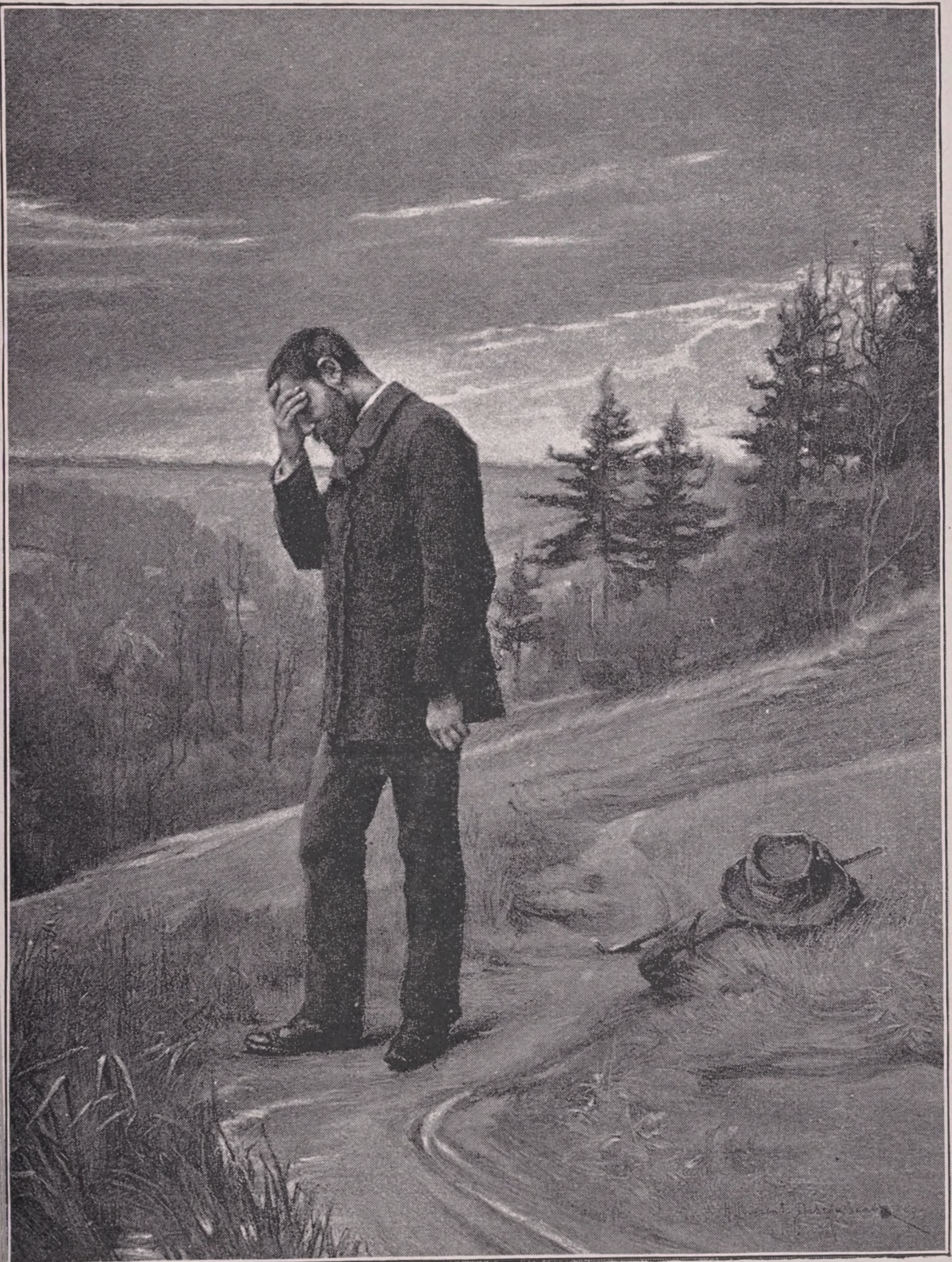
"What should I do?" he replied. "I could not remain here and do nothing."

Claudet, too much affected to see that Reine's impassibility was only superficial, thought, "she looks upon my departure as quite in the order of things; she treats me as she would M. Theotime or Collector Boucheseiche. A glass of wine, two or three indifferent questions and then good-bye, take care of yourself."

He too assumed a careless air and cried:

"Bah, that profession has always had a charm for me. A soldier's gun is a trifle heavier than a hunter's, that is all. Then I shall see the world; that will develop my mind."

He crossed the kitchen and chatted to the magpie. Then he walked toward M. Vincart lying in his niche. He took the paralytic's hand, pressed it gently and tried to engage him in conversation, but the invalid gazed at him uneasily.



When he returned to Reine's side, he raised his glass.

"Your health, Reine," said he with forced gaiety, "when I return you shall see. I will be a finished soldier."

However, when he put the glass to his lips, tears rolled down his cheeks and mingled with the wine.

"Well," he sighed, turning away his head in order to wipe his eyes with the back of his hand, "it is time to go. Take care of yourself and think of me occasionally."

She accompanied him to the door.

"Adieu, Reine."

"Adieu," she murmured in a low voice. In her agitation she extended both of her hands. He saw her emotion, he imagined that she still loved him, that perhaps she regretted having rejected him and impulsively he clasped her in his arms. He pressed her to his breast and imprinted two kisses bedewed with tears upon her cheek. He could not give her up and redoubled his caresses with passionate ardor. He lost his

self-control. His kisses grew so ardent that Reine was seized with shame and terror at the thought that the man who embraced her thus was her brother. She freed herself from his arms and pushed him aside violently.

"Adieu!" she repeated, entering the kitchen and hastily closing the door.

Claudet remained for a moment in front of that closed door and regaining his self-possession, he turned away.

When he looked back the roof of the farm was no longer visible and the stony, bare, waste land stretched before him.

"No," he muttered between his teeth, "she has never loved me. She thinks only of the other one! There is nothing for me to do but to go away and never return!"

IX

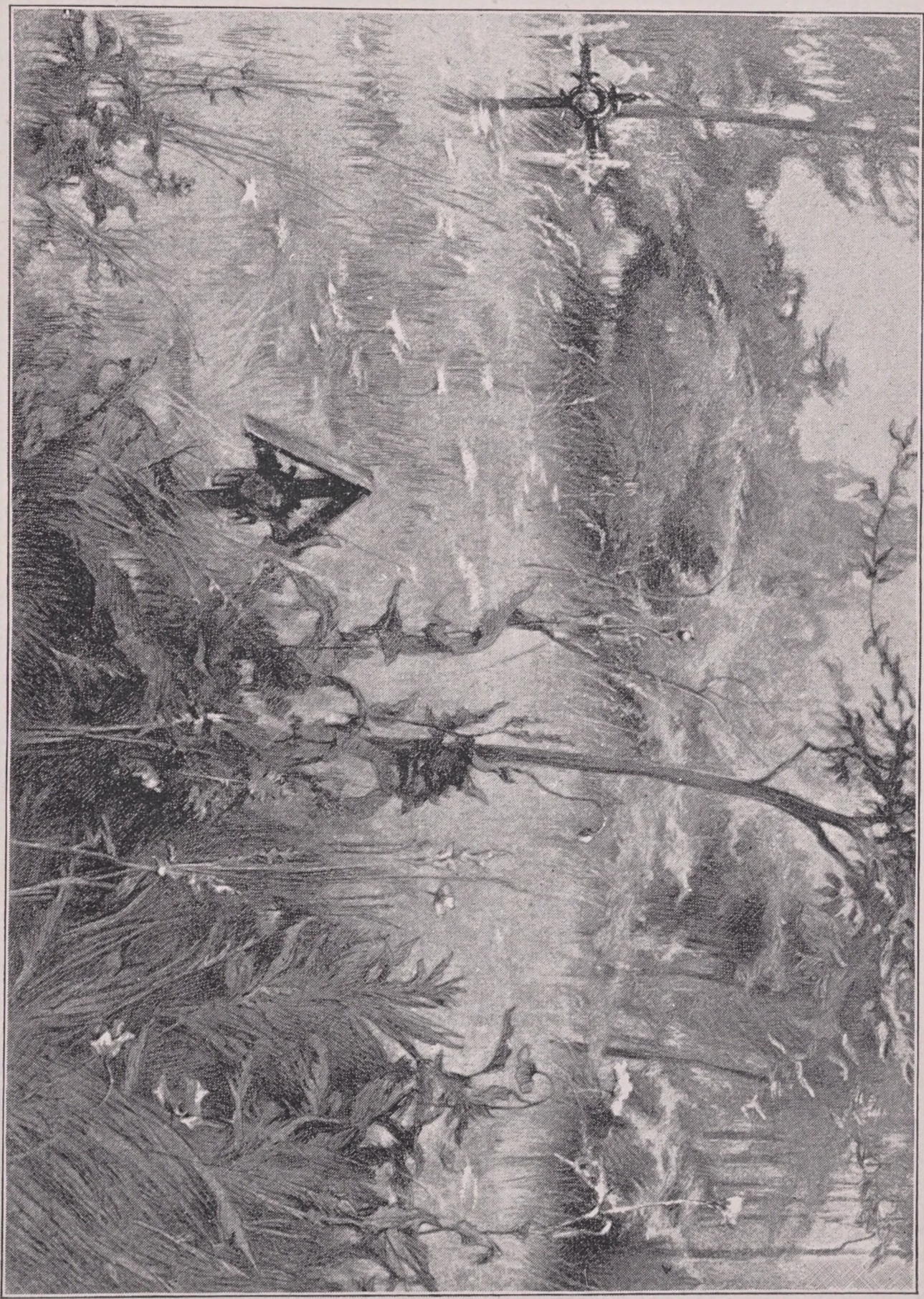
Arrived at Langres, Claudet enlisted in the Seventeenth regiment of foot. Five days later without heeding Manette's lamentations, he left Vivey for the camp at Sathonay, where his regiment was stationed.

Julien remained alone at the castle. At first he experienced a sense of uneasiness. Never had he known how insignificant a position he occupied in his own home and how much life Claudet brought into it. He felt out of his element and blushed to find himself of so little use to himself and to others. At the same time new duties were imposed upon him which startled him. The management of the estates which Claudet had always attended to, fell entirely upon him.

He felt, too, that he must be more attentive to sorrowing Manette in order to soften as much as possible the blow caused by her son's unexpected

departure. The old housekeeper was like Rachel inconsolable; she filled the house with her complaints and seemed to hold Julien responsible for her trouble. The latter treated her with patience and meritorious indulgence. He was compassionately kind and endeavored to make her life pleasanter. He accustomed himself to rising at day-break. In hunting costume, followed by Montagnard, whom he had taken under his protection since Claudet's departure, he sought the forest, visited the sections under cultivation, hired workmen, became acquainted with the people, interested himself in their labors, their joys and their sorrows; then when evening came, he was surprised at not feeling tired and lonesome, and at eating with relish the supper prepared by Manette.

Since he had frequented the forest, no longer as a stranger and an idler, but with the intention of accomplishing a useful work, he learned to see and understand it better. Nature and human beings no longer inspired him with disdain mingled with mistrust. In proportion as his mind



expanded, the exterior world seemed more attractive to him.

In his thoughts he associated the beauty of the forest with his love for Reine. Notwithstanding the strength of that love, he had not seen Mlle. Vincart. At first, the preoccupation caused by Claudet's departure, the new duties thrust upon him, had prevented him from thinking of the possibility of a renewal of their relations.

Gradually, however, he began to consider the situation presented by his cousin's generous sacrifice and to wonder how he could profit by it.

Claudet's departure, indeed, left the field free to him but as yet he lacked confidence. The mere fact that Reine had rejected the "Great Huntsman" did not seem to him sufficient encouragement. The cause of that refusal he did not know. Even were Reine's heart free, it was not probable that she would love him. Could she forget the insult he had offered her? After that outrageous aggression in the collier's cottage, he had committed the folly of proposing

for Claudet. Those were offenses a woman would not forgive!

He had only seen Mlle. Vincart at distant intervals, at mass on Sundays, and each time that he had tried to catch her eye, she turned away her head and pretended not to see him. She carefully avoided all intercourse with the castle.

When business matters obliged her to address M. de Buxieres, she did not write to him herself, but corresponded through the medium of M. Arbillot.

Claudet's heroic departure availed nothing; matters remained as they had been and Julien after a brief dream of hope again became a prey to agitation. He thought that while he hesitated and remained silent the days and months were passing by; that Reine would soon attain her twenty-third year and that she would certainly marry. It was known that she had some money and suitors would not be lacking. Although she had rejected Claudet, she could not always remain at the farm alone, and she would some day

decide to marry, if not for love, at least for convenience.

"To think," said Julien, "that she lives a few paces from me, that I love her and that I would only have to cross the fields to cast myself at her feet and that I do not dare to venture upon. Last spring in M. Theotime's cottage I should have confessed my love instead of frightening her with brutal caresses! Now it is too late. I have wounded, insulted her. I have separated her from Claudet who loved her. I have made two people unhappy—without counting myself—and this is the result of my edifying tergiversation! Oh, if one could only live one's life over!"

While he lamented, time flew by! The greater part of winter was gone, the March winds had ceased and one could already hear the cuckoo in the trees.

Taking advantage of a bright morning, Julien went to visit a farm which he owned at Aujeures.

After lunching with the farmer, he returned through the woods in order to enjoy the beauties

of budding nature. He walked slowly along, recalling Reine's image as he came upon the star-like white flowers known by the name of Queen of the Woods. On his way he came to a ditch which he thought he could clear at a bound, and either he lost his balance or he was too preoccupied, for his foot slipped and he fell.

He rose and tried to walk, but a sharp pain in his ankle forced him to lean against a tree. His foot was as heavy as lead and when he put it on the ground; the pain was almost intolerable.

He could only regain the path by dragging himself along from tree to tree. Exhausted by the effort, he sat down upon the grass, unbuttoned his gaiter and with difficulty unlaced his boot. His foot was swollen. He began to fear that he had sprained his ankle and wondered how he should reach Vivey. Montagnard, his faithful companion, snarled occasionally as if to say:

"What ails you? how shall we get out of this?"

Suddenly footsteps resounded on the pathway; Julien could hear the rustle of skirts amongst

the brushwood and at the moment that he was thanking fortune for having sent along a passer-by, he saw the pale face of Reine at a turn in the road. She was accompanied by a village maiden, carrying a basketful of primroses and freshly gathered ivy. Reine was familiar with plants possessing medicinal virtues and gathered them herself in order to be able to administer them to the farm-servants in case of need.

When only a few steps away, she saw Julien and her brow clouded over; but upon perceiving his suffering face and his injured foot, she quickly comprehended that something unusual had happened and stopping near him she said:

"You seem to be in pain, M. de Buxieres. What has happened to you?"

"An accident," Julien replied, trying to appear unconcerned. "I fell and sprained my foot."

The young girl's face assumed a compassionate expression and after some hesitation, she asked:

"Will you show me your foot? My mother

was a bone-setter and they say that I have inherited her secret for curing sprains."

She looked in her basket and drew from it an empty bottle and a white handkerchief.

"Zelie," she said to the astonished girl, "go quickly and fill this bottle at the brook."

As she spoke, Julien with many a blush, finished taking off his boot and stocking. Reine, without any false prudery, raised the swollen member and examined it carefully.

"I believe," she murmured, "that the muscles have been strained."

Without another word, she tore the handkerchief into bandages. Zelie returned with the bottle filled with fresh water and Reine poured it upon Julien's instep, then she adroitly rubbed the muscles, while Julien struggled hard to conceal his pain. Silently and attentively the young girl wrapped his foot in the linen bandages which she fastened with pins.

"There," said she, "try to put on your boot, that will support your foot a little. Zelie, run to the farm as fast as you can, have the tilted



cart hitched up and see that it is brought hither as quickly as possible."

The girl picked up her basket and began to run.

"M. de Buxieres," continued Reine, "do you think you can walk as far as the drive by leaning on my arm?"

"Yes," he replied with a grateful glance which embarrassed Mlle. Vincart, "your hands have soothed me as if by a miracle. I feel better and upon your arm I could go wherever you would!"

She aided him to rise and he walked several paces leaning upon her.

"That is better!" he sighed.

He was so unutterably happy to be so near Reine, that he was unconscious of pain.

"Walk slowly," she said, "and do not fear to lean upon me. It is important that you should reach the drive."

"How good you are," he stammered, "and how penitent I am!"

"Penitent, why?" interrupted Reine precipitately. "I have done nothing extraordinary; anyone would have done as much."

"I beseech you," he implored, "do not mar my happiness. I know very well that the first passer-by would have helped me, but the thought that it was you who came to my assistance makes me joyful, while it increases my remorse. I have so little merited that you should take an interest in me."

He paused, hoping perhaps that she would ask for an explanation, but seeing that she remained impassive and did not seem to grasp his meaning, he added:

"I have offended, displeased you. I have been cruelly punished for it. But tardy regrets are powerless to cure the wounds inflicted. Ah, if one could only blot out the hours during which one has been mad and blind."

"Do not let us speak of it any more," she replied briefly, but in a voice singularly soft and gentle. In spite of herself, she was touched by the penitence expressed in those incoherent sentences. In proportion as Julien grew humble, Reine's rancor vanished. She became convinced of the fact that she had always loved him, not-

withstanding his faults, his defects and his awkwardness. She experienced a blissful sensation in ascertaining that for the first time he had allowed her a glimpse of his heart. Both maintained silence, but they felt drawn mutually nearer, a mute bond was established between them.

From time to time Reine stopped that Julien might rest. Without any embarrassment she lent him the support of her arm or shoulder, and the young man seemed to gather renewed strength from that support.

Slowly—but all too soon for them—they reached the end of the path and found the wagon awaiting them in the road. Julien climbed into it with the assistance of Reine and a servant. When he was placed upon the straw strewn in the bottom of the cart, Julien's eyes met those of Reine and they exchanged by that means more significant confidences than they had during their entire journey. It only lasted a few moments, but those few moments contained a confession of love—avowals mingled with penitence, promises of pardon.

"Thank you, mademoiselle," at length said Buxieres, "will you shake hands with me?"

She gave him her hand and as he clasped it Reine turned to the driver on the box and said:

"Justin, walk the horse so as to avoid jolting. Good evening, M. de Buxieres, send for the doctor as soon as you reach home and all will be well. I shall send over to obtain news of you."

She strolled pensively along the road leading to La Thuiliere, while the wagon took the direction of Vivey. The doctor, who was summoned to the castle, said that M. de Buxieres had sprained his ankle and that the first dressing had been well done. He rebandaged his foot and ordered his patient to keep very quiet. Two days later, Margaret came to inquire about M. de Buxieres. She brought a large bouquet of lilies of the valley which Mlle. Vincart sent to console him for not being able to visit the woods and which Julien kept for several days.

The sprain obtained at Maigrefontaine and providentially cared for by Reine, the young man's return in a wagon from La Thuiliere, the

sending of the bouquet of lilies, aroused Manette's curiosity. She scented beneath all that a secret love-affair and spread the news through the village. Soon the entire community, from the woodmen to Abbe Pernot, knew that something was "going on" between M. de Buxieres and old Vincart's daughter.

Meanwhile, Julien, not suspecting that his love for Reine was furnishing a topic of conversation for the gossips of the neighborhood, cursed the accident which confined him to his couch. At length he could put his foot upon the ground and walk with the aid of a cane, then in the course of a few days the doctor allowed him to go out.

His first visit was to La Thuiliere. He found Reine in the kitchen, seated near the sleeping paralytic. She was reading a newspaper which she kept in her hand when she rose to receive her visitor.

After she had congratulated the latter upon his recovery and he had thanked her warmly, she showed him the paper.

"I am very much disturbed," she said in some confusion, "it seems that there is to be war and that our troops are in Italy. Do you know any news of Claudet?"

Julien started. He expected anything but that question. The "Great Huntsman's" name had not been mentioned at Maigrefontaine and he had deluded himself with the hope that Reine no longer thought of him. Upon hearing that name from the girl's lips, on witnessing the emotion which the reading of that newspaper caused her, all his mistrust returned and in an unsteady voice he replied: "He wrote to me a few days ago. He was very well."

"Where is he?"

"In Italy with his regiment. He told me he should leave the following day for Tortone, where they expected to engage in their first battle."

Reine's eyes grew humid and through her tears she murmured:

"Poor Claudet, what is he doing now?"

"Ah," selfishly thought Julien, as his face darkened, "she loves him yet!"

Poor Claudet! That same evening while they were talking of him at the farm, he encamped with his battalion not far from Voghera on the margin of an affluent of the Po. His regiment formed the extreme outpost of the army, and, at nightfall, Claudet was on guard on the banks of that tributary.

It was a magnificent night in Mazy, the Italian sky with its myriads of stars seemed grander and nearer to the "Great Huntsman" than the misty sky of Haute-Marne. The nightingales warbled in the orchards. What delight to listen to them, what serenity enveloped that flowery plain!

Who would mistrust that on both sides preparations were being made for a combat. At times shots were heard and the nightingales were silenced. Then all grew quiet and the chorus of birds' voices recommenced.

Claudet, leaning on his musket, thought that at the same time the nightingales were singing in the park at Vivey and the garden at La Thuilliere. He saw Reine seated at her window listening to that amorous melody. His heart swelled

and a sensation of homesickness stole over him. As he wiped his eyes he grew ashamed of his weakness, the sense of his responsibility came over him and once more upon the watch he scoured the plain and the dark thicket in which the enemy might be concealed.

The following day, the twentieth of May, a skirmish took place. Claudet's regiment attacked Montebello. The soldiers plunged into the rice-fields, scaled vineyards and charged the enemy's columns. Through the confusion of the gun-shots and the thunder of artillery could be heard the guttural hurras of the Austrians and the cries mingled with oaths of the French troopers.

The moats were heaped with corpses, the clarions sounded the charge, the living rushed to the fore. The ridges were crowned with masses of human beings, the first red-pantalooned soldiers were seen on the streets of Montebello. They besieged the houses, courts and inclosures; momentarily could be heard blows upon barricaded doors, the breaking of windows, the cries of frightened women. The white uniforms fell back

in disorder. The village belonged to the French! Not however, altogether!

Near the cemetery there was a hillock and there the enemy was intrenched; drawing up their cannon they fired upon the village. The assailants hesitated and receded before that hurricane of shot. Then a general urged on his horse and rallied the men. One of the foremost, an alert soldier, broad of shoulder with a brown mustache and olive skin, rushed forward. It was Claudet! Others followed him and soon hundreds of men rushed toward the cemetery with their bayonets. The "Great Huntsman" bounded across the fields as he had formerly done when in pursuit of a roebuck at Charbourniere.

To his right and left, soldiers fell around him, but he scarcely heeded them. The wall of the cemetery was scaled, they fought in the trenches, it was war to the knife. At last the redoubt was raised and the routing of the enemy began. At the moment that Claudet stooped to pick up a cartridge, a bullet struck him on the

forehead and without a sound he sank among the fennel which grew round the tombs.

* * * * *

"I have sad news for you," said Julien to Reine, entering the garden at La Thuiliere one June evening. The preceding day he had been officially informed by the mayor of the death of Germain-Claudet Sejournant of the Seventeenth regiment of foot, killed by the enemy, May 20, 1859.

Reine was standing between two rose-bushes. From M. de Buxieres' first words she anticipated bad news and turned pale.

"Claudet?" she murmured.

"He is dead," said Julien in a low voice. "He was killed at Montebello."

The young girl stood before him motionless with tearless eyes, and for a moment Buxieres thought she would bear calmly the intelligence of the death of a man whom she had refused to marry. Suddenly she turned, took several steps, then leaning her head upon her folded arms, against a plum tree near by, she



burst into tears. By the convulsive motion of her shoulders one could perceive the violence of her sobs.

M. de Buxieres, amazed at the sight of such grief, again became a prey to suspicion and mistrust. He was jealous of the dead man for whom she wept. She must have loved Claudet to abandon herself before a witness to such a burst of grief. He tried to assuage it by sympathetic words, but he had scarcely spoken when she turned and fled, disappearing within the kitchen and closing the door behind her. Several moments later, Margaret came to tell Buxieres that Reine desired to be alone and begged him to excuse her.

He left the farm, disconcerted, dejected, ready to weep himself at the failure of his hopes, and turned sadly toward Vivey. When he reached the village he met Abbe Pernot who was walking hastily in the direction of the castle.

"Ah," exclaimed the priest, "good-day, M. de Buxieres, I was just on my way to your house. Is it true that you have received bad news?"

Julien shook his head in the affirmative and informed the priest of the sad communication he had just received.

"Poor fellow!" sighed the abbe, "to go away at twenty-six, full of strength, of life, it is hard to die thus! He was so genial and such an excellent shot." Then, as he was not naturally melancholy, and could not remain downcast long, he would console himself with a quotation from the Bible or by one of those pious commonplaces of which he was in the habit of making use; he would add in conclusion: "The Lord is just, he counts the hairs of our heads, and our destinies are in his hands! We will celebrate mass for the repose of Claudet's soul."

He cleared his throat and glanced at Julien.

"I wished to see you," he continued, "for two reasons, M. de Buxieres. Firstly, to inform you of Claudet's fate, and secondly to tell you of something—delicate—which concerns you, but which concerns another person as well, and derogates from the dignity of the parish."

Julien looked at him with a startled air. The

priest pushed open the park gate and entering first, added: "Come in, we can converse better here."

When they were beneath the trees, he continued:

"M. de Buxieres, do you know that you are giving the tongues of my parishioners cause to wag? Ah," he added, in response to a gesture from his companion: "without premeditation, I am certain, yet they gossip about you—and Reine."

"About Mlle. Vincart?" exclaimed Julien indignantly. "What can they say?"

"Many things which displease me. They talk of the sprain you received at Maigrefontaine in company with Reine Vincart, of your return in her wagon, of your visits to La Thuiliere and the Lord knows what besides. And as mankind, especially women, are always more inclined to think ill than well of a person, they say you are compromising the girl. For Reine lives alone, so to speak, and without protection. It is therefore my place as her pastor to care for her. That is why I have decided to ask you—to be

more circumspect and not to lay her open to criticism."

"I do not understand you, sir!" cried Julien angrily.

"Egad, I have explained clearly enough. Human nature is weak. A young girl soon loses her reputation if she receives attentions from a man who cannot marry her."

"And why could I not marry her?" asked he with a blush.

"Because she is not of your rank and because you do not love her well enough to overlook that difference."

"What do you know about it?" interrupted Julien with vehemence. "I have no absurd prejudices, and the obstacles are not on my side. But make yourself easy, sir," he added bitterly, "the danger only exists in your parishioners' imaginations; Reine has never given me a thought; it was Claudet whom she loved!"

"Hum, hum!" interpolated the priest doubtfully.

"You would not doubt it," insisted Buxieres,

"if like me you had seen her burst into tears when I told her of Sejournant's death. She did not care that I was present to witness her sorrow. My presence made no difference to her. It made me feel how little she cared for me!"

"You love her then very much?" asked the abbe, an almost imperceptible smile playing about his lips.

"Yes, I love her," he cried. "But," he continued, regretting his frankness, "I am very foolish to allow you to know of my love, since Reine does not love me at all."

A pause ensued during which the priest took a pinch of snuff.

"M. de Buxieres," he said with the air of an oracle, "Claudet is dead—and the dead, like the absent, are in the wrong. Moreover, who knows but that you are mistaken as to the nature of Reine's grief? I will find out to-day. Good evening, keep still and be prudent."

Thereupon the priest left him, but instead of returning to the parsonage, he turned his steps toward La Thuiliere.

Notwithstanding Margaret's objections, he exercised his pastoral authority and sought out Reine.

What he said to her did not pass beyond the room in which the conversation took place. He must have found words with which to soften her sorrow, for when he was gone, the girl descended to the garden with a placid, though melancholy face.

She remained amongst the rose-bushes a long time, but her thoughts were not bitter, for a wonderful calmness had settled upon her, like a healing balm.

Several days later the bells of Vivey rang, announcing a mass was to be said in memory of Claudet. The Great Huntsman having been beloved by all in the country, a large concourse assembled in front of the church—companions of the chase, woodmen, the makers of wooden shoes, the inhabitants of farms in the surrounding country, no one was absent.

The nave was not large enough to hold them

all and many were obliged to remain without. Arbeltier, the village carpenter, had made a catafalque, which stood, draped in black and surrounded by tapers, at the steps of the high altar. Upon the coffin lay armfuls of wild flowers sent from La Thuiliere, exhaling an aromatic odor. Abbe Pernot, in his mourning robes, officiated. Manette Sejournant's grief was very noisy, but she received less sympathy than Reine Vincart. The black garments of the kneeling girl heightened her pallor. She did not utter a sound, but by the contraction of her lips, the quivering of her chin, one could see that she was stifling her sobs. Occasionally, too, a tear sparkled on her lashes and rolled down her pale cheek. From the church-warden's pew, in which he sat alone, Julien de Buxieres saw with anger the mute eloquence of that concentrated sorrow and felt the pangs of jealousy more keenly than ever. He envied the fate of that man mourned with so dignified a tenderness.

Again Buxieres was tormented by the mystery of that attachment so deep and so evident.

"She loved Claudet, for she mourns him," he repeated, "and if she loved him why did she reject him and drive the unhappy fellow to despair?"

After the absolution, the entire assembly passed before Julien to the catafalque. When Reine Vincart's turn came, she held out her hand to M. de Buxieres, at the same time looking at him so sadly yet so kindly that he became confused.

That glance, that confident pressure of the hand, seemed to him like an appeal, like an encouragement to speak. When the men and women were dispersing, without troubling himself as to what they would say, without caring for the curious eyes watching him, he resolved to follow Reine.

Fortune favored him. Reine Vincart had chosen to return to the farm by a path which ran along the woods and the park inclosure. Julien entered the castle precipitately, crossed the gardens and followed within the grounds an alley parallel with the path without, hidden from view by the



lime and nut trees. Between the branches the young man could see the black gown of Reine who was walking along rapidly. At the end of the inclosure he pushed open a gate and entered the forest path. Upon seeing him before her, Reine seemed more surprised than displeased. She paused for a moment and then continued on her way. When she passed him, he said:

"Mlle. Reine, will you permit me to accompany you to La Thuiliere?"

"I should be glad to have you," she replied briefly. She anticipated that something decisive was about to take place and her voice trembled. Buxieres walked beside Reine but he seemed in no hurry to speak, and the silence was only broken by the flight of a bird or the rustling of the leaves.

"Reine," Julien suddenly began, "you just gave me your hand so kindly, that I decided to speak plainly to you. I love you, Reine, and have loved you a long time, but I have been so accustomed to keeping my thoughts to myself, that I

have not dared to tell you. That will explain to you my passion and absurd inconsistencies. While I hesitated another took my place. Although he is dead, I know you love him."

Reine listened to his words with bowed head, half-closed eyes and throbbing pulses.

"I have never loved him in the manner you suppose," she replied laconically.

Julien's blue eyes sparkled. Another pause followed Reine's words. They had reached the fields of Planche au Vacher.

"Why, then, did you weep for him?"

A melancholy smile hovered for a moment about Reine's rosy lips.

"Are you jealous of my tears?" she asked.

"Yes," he cried, "I love you so entirely that I am jealous of Claudet! Since his death grieved you so deeply, he must have been dearer to you than those who survive him."

"You should not think so," she said softly, "since I refused to marry him."

He shook his head and seemed still doubtful. Then she thought that if she did not wholly

reassure Julien by telling him the truth, he would be miserable. She knew that she was beloved and she wished to be loved with security.

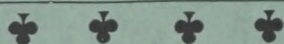
Obeying Abbe Pernot's injunctions, she leaned toward Julien and crimson with shame, with tearful eyes, she whispered in his ear the secret of her relationship with Claudet. That confidence was murmured so low that it could almost have been confounded with the humming of the insects and the song of the larks.

The sun shone brightly. The woods were as gay and as full of flowers as upon the day on which Julien manifested his love with such mad violence in the collier's cottage.

Scarcely had the last words of that avowal died away upon Reine's lips, when Julien de Buxieres encircling her with his arms, gently kissed her eyes—and that time Reine did not repulse him.

THE END

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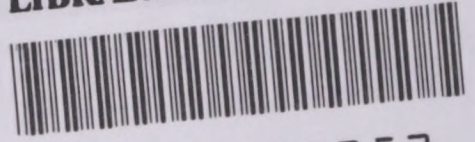
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