The Coming Harvest

Rene Bazin

THE COMING HARVEST

BOOKS BY RENÉ BAZIN

PUBLISHED BY CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

The Nun . . . . (L'Isolée)	$1.00
The Coming Harvest . . . . . . (Le Blé qui Lève)	$1.25
Redemption . . . . (De toute son Âme)	$1.25

THE COMING HARVEST

(LE BLÉ QUI LÈVE)

1518

Santa Barbara, California

BY

RENÉ BAZIN

B363

TRANSLATED BY

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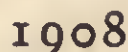
NEW YORK
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
1908



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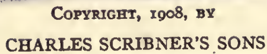

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Published August, 1908

#1518

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THE COMING HARVEST.

I.

THE PROCESSION OF THE WOOD-CUTTERS.

The sun was setting. The east wind moistened the tufts of sod, hastening the decay of the fallen leaves, and coating the trunks of the trees, and the herbs grown old and flabby since the Autumn, with an impervious glaze like that the tide blows in upon the cliffs. The sea was a long way off, however, and the wind came from another direction. It had swept through the forests of the Morvan—that land of fountains in which it had drenched itself—through those of Montsauche and of Montreuillon and, nearer still, that of Blin; it was hastening toward other groves of trees of the immense preserve of Nièvre, on to the vast forest of Tronçay, to the woods of Crux-la-Ville and those of Saint-Franchy. The atmosphere seemed pure, but far in all the distances, above the cuttings, on the outskirts of the clearings, in the hollow of the footpaths, something blue lay sleeping like smoke.

"You are sure, Renard, that the oak is a hundred and sixty years old?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Comte, it carries its age written on its body; see, here are the eight red lines; I made them myself at the time of the cutting."

"That is so, you saved it; and now they want me to condemn it to death! No, Renard, I can not! A hundred and sixty years! It has seen five generations of Meximieus."

"That makes, all the same, the thirty-second old tree that we have spared," grumbled the guard. "At that age, in poor soil such as ours, the oak stops growing, it merely matures. However, Monsieur le Comte is free to do as he pleases. He will have to settle it with Monsieur le Marquis."

The guard relapsed into silence. His ruddy, close-shaven face expressed the disdain which a subordinate, who has been omnipotent, feels for the administration which has succeeded him. He was standing a little behind his master, a green velvet cap on his head, warm and comfortable in a velvet suit of the same shade as his cap; his hands crossed on his chest held a half-open memorandum book: "Condition of the full-grown trees of the estate of Fonteneilles," and his legs, too slender for his stout body, gave him the appearance of a German puppet hung upon cords. He was looking at his master, who was smiling at the oak and saying very low: "Well, my fine old tree, you are safe; I will come back and see you again when your leaves are out." The tree soared

upward, slender, symmetrical, letting the living shadow of its branches fall upon the bare underwood.

"You see, Renard," resumed Michel de Meximieu, pursuing his own thoughts, "I love my trees, for they ask nothing from me; I have known them for a long time; I see their tops from the window of my room; they are friends more trusty than those who cut them down."

"They are a tribe of liars, the wood-cutters, Monsieur le Comte. They are poachers, good-for-naughts, they——"

"No, Renard, no! If they did nothing worse than kill my game, I would willingly pardon them. All that I mean to say is, that they are petty natures, like so many others."

"*Parbleu!* The poachers do not trouble those who do not hunt: but for myself, I hunt!" muttered Renard in an undertone.

His master did not seem to hear him. In his left hand, hanging down by his side, he held a hatchet with a hammer head used to mark the trees. After an instant, he replaced it in the leather case suspended from his belt. He was looking now at the vast yard that he had just inspected, ten acres of underwood almost entirely cut, where the wood-cutters were still at work, each in his marked-out line, in "his workshop," among the stacked-up cords of wood and the piles of twigs. At the farthest corner of this clearing, toward the east, a second clearing was laid out, with a winding pass lying between them like a gorge between two plains.

"Come, Renard, we have had enough of this miserable business! Go back to the château and tell my father that I will return by the cross-road of Fonteneilles."

"Very well, Monsieur le Comte."

"And also tell Baptiste to harness the victoria, to take the General to the train at Corbigny."

The guard, making a half turn to the left, stalked away with a quick, vigorous step, and for some time the noise could be heard of his brodkins striking against the young shoots and breaking the brambles.

Michel de Meximieu had just been obeying an order which had seemed to him hard and even humiliating. In March, several months after the regular sale of wood to a local merchant, he had been compelled by order of his father to sacrifice a large number of trees which had been reserved from the sale, personally to select them for cutting and for that purpose to "check" them by effacing the red lines, and by marking the side of the tree with a stroke of the hammer. Perhaps he had spared too many, as Renard said; but he blamed himself for having obeyed too strictly, and the thought made him suffer.

Michel was young, vigorous and plain. His plainness came principally from his being badly proportioned. He was of medium height, but his legs were long, his body short and his head massive. There was neither regularity nor harmony in his features, which might have been carved by the realistic and powerful hand of a workman of the

Middle Ages: a low forehead beneath rough brown hair, which came down in a point in the middle upon the dull skin; blue eyes, deep set and slightly unequal, a large nose and long lips—the most expressive of his features—shaven lips, the lips of an orator perhaps, if opportunity and education had been favourable to the son of the Marquis de Meximieu; finally, a square jaw, which, when he spoke, was scarcely opened, and when he was silent was closed like a vise. He had neither charm nor beauty, but his face expressed one ruling quality: will power. It showed energy, not in reserve and still inactive, but trained and already victorious. Over what temptations? Over what revolts? The face is a book where the causes of things are not all written. One could only read on that of Michel de Meximieu: "I have struggled"; one could see that this young man was not dazzled by life, as so many are, and that he had judged it. Two slight wrinkles bridled his mouth like a bit. His smile alone remained young and cordial. But it was fugitive.

At that moment Michel was not smiling. His eyebrows were drawn together, the lashes lowered by the effort of his eyes to focus on the distance, and he was searching among the workmen distributed far off in the clearing endeavouring to recognize the one to whom he wished to speak. Although he was going to speak to a woodcutter who was a socialist, it did not occur to him to take off his gloves. He knew that it is not differences which wound, but the pride which shows them. When he had glanced over the

vast forest yard, and had convinced himself that Gilbert Cloquet was not there:

"I will ask his son-in-law," he thought, "where Gilbert is."

Then striding over the cut branches, and going around the long piles of round logs or of corded charcoal sticks, he advanced briskly to the middle of the clearing.

A young man was working there, picking up the pieces of firewood which he stacked up between the stakes. He heard the master coming. He had seen him from a long way off. But he let him approach within three steps without saluting him. Michel de Meximieu was used to such treatment and he prepared to speak first. The little wound to his self-love and his unappreciated friendship, bled inwardly. But his voice betrayed nothing.

"Well, Lureux, we shall have a frost to-night, if the wind goes down?"

A voice young also, but harder, replied:

"It will not go down."

And in the tone of these words, in the manner of dwelling upon the words "go down," in the swift smile which curled up the mustaches, worn drooping in the old French fashion, it was very plain that Lureux, while speaking of the wind, was thinking of another force, which likewise would not go down.

The wood-cutter, who answered with this phrase of double meaning, was a man scarcely older than Michel, of more than medium height, with a clear complexion, and a face which, barred

diagonally with a tawny mustache, rather thin and very young, expressed nothing but satisfaction with himself and the resolution to talk no more. His eyes, animated and jesting for a moment, had immediately recovered, between their half-closed lids, a look as innocent as that of a yellow primrose shining between two leaves. He had thrown his jacket upon a heap of twigs. His violet-checked shirt, his trousers of coarse brown cloth, revealed a supple and well-developed body, admirably formed.

Around the workman, in the clearing, the piles of wood ran in straight lines like walls thrown out in all directions, and upon one of these walls, on the edge of a pile of "white wood," as the wood of the aspen and birch is called, a rosy and curly-headed little boy, the child of one of the men working in the forest, was sitting, dangling his legs, his wooden shoes also dangling from his feet, just balanced on the tips of his toes. Lureux looked at the child to avoid looking at the master and to show that he did not want to keep up the conversation. The other workmen were probably watching him, and he made it a point to be rude, not so much from personal dislike, as from the fear that the others would accuse him of talking with the bourgeois. Michel understood this and asked:

"Where is your father-in-law? I do not see him."

"Over there," said the man pointing to the left; "he is cutting down an old tree, he has finished with the underbrush."

"Thanks, Lureux. Good-by!"

"Good-by, sir!"

And he watched the master contemptuously as he walked away.

The latter left the clearing and entered the forest. Less than a hundred yards away, he saw the man for whom he was looking. The wood-cutter was felling an old tree marked on the side. He hit with a slanting stroke. The blade of the axe sank deeper at each blow into the spread foot of the tree, striking out a chip, moist and white as a slice of bread, and then rose, ready to fall again. The blade glittered, polished and moistened with the sap from the living wood. The body of the workman followed the movement of his axe and the whole tree vibrated to the lowest roots. A shirt and a worn pair of trousers, both glued to his limbs with perspiration, revealed the man's whole frame, his prominent shoulder blades, his ribs, his narrow pelvis, and the long thigh-bones barely covered over with muscles, like fagots covered with soft bark. There were dark circles under his clear eyes in their deep sunken sockets, wounds that had been enlarged by the suffering of the heart. Two hollows in the flesh, like two prints of the thumb, emphasized by another hollow at the base of the cheek-bones, proclaimed: "This man has, by his own labour, wasted his flesh and carved his body in the harvest field and in the forest clearing." The lean neck said: "The north wind has stripped off the bark and left only the hard, dry wood." His hands, which were mere bundles of

veins, tendons, and dry muscles, awkward for fine work, but to be depended upon for hard labour, said: "We express a long life of courageous work and of endurance; we bear witness that his labour has been hard, and that he has given good measure in his prescribed work."

"Good-day, Gilbert!"

"Good-day, Monsieur Michel!"

He rested his axe on the ground. Then lifted his cap with one hand while he held out the other. The wood-cutter's tired face was illumined, like the axe, with a ray of light. It was a face which had been handsome. Fifty years of poverty had emaciated it, but the features remained fine and clear-cut, and his beard, which was still fair, lengthened it nobly, giving to Gilbert Cloquet the appearance of a man of the North, a Scandinavian or a Norseman, who had come down to the pastures and the forests of the centre of France.

"Well, Gilbert, I don't suppose that you are satisfied with the way things are going? I heard the bugle again yesterday evening. The strike is not called, but for us it is a threat, and, for you, a rehearsal. Do you think there will be a new strike?"

The wood-cutter, passing his hand over his long beard, blinked his eyes and looked at the underbrush which was beginning to turn brown.

"I do not think so," he answered in a measured voice; "they wish to threaten, as you say, so that wages shall not drop. But that will not begin again immediately. Anyway, we must hope not, Monsieur Michel, for I need work, more than the others——"

He stopped short and Michel understood that Gilbert Cloquet was thinking of his daughter, the frivolous and extravagant Marie Lureux, "*La Lureuse*," who, little by little, had wasted all his property. The dull blows of axes cutting the undergrowth passed by on the wind. The young man began again.

"But even you belong to the union and pay your five sous a month; I have never understood that."

"Yes, my heart is with them, but not always my head."

"And yet you obey all their orders! A man of your age!"

"Well, the party requires that, Monsieur Michel. But there are times when I prefer, for my own reasons, to remain with them."

"What masters you give yourselves, you poor people! You do not gain by the change! After all, that is not why I came to speak to you. I have near the château a small lot of wood which has not been sold. It is my supply for next winter. Will you cut it for me? I give you the preference, because you are an old friend of the family."

"About how many days' work?"

"A fortnight. Perhaps more. Have you finished your work here?"

"Yes; the others will need a day more to finish. But my lot turned out to be smaller, and I am cutting down one of the old trees, which have been sold to Méhaut. I can begin to-morrow morning in your lot. That is settled."

"You will be all alone there, and I know that

the work will be well done. It will be better not to say anything about it."

"Certainly."

The wood-cutter stretched out his large hand to seal the contract. Then, embarrassed and shaking his head on account of his discomfort, he said:

"Monsieur Michel, since I am engaged, would you be willing to advance me twenty francs on the work? I do not know how I manage to spend so much!"

Michel took a gold piece from his purse and gave it to Gilbert.

"I know, my good fellow. You are too good to some one who is not so at all. Adieu!"

At that moment a shrill bugle call sounded in the distance, far away to the right in the forest. It was a military call, and sounded like "lights out." Swift, urgent, imperative, it ended on a prolonged note which ordered silence, rest from work, and repose. It was repeated after an interval of a few seconds, and this time the bell of the bugle must have been directed to the side where the two men were, for it sounded clearer and stronger. Instantly, Gilbert Cloquet turned aside to take from a branch nearby his old round jacket which he wanted to throw over his shoulders on the walk home.

With a sudden movement, and as if unable to restrain his irritation, Michel stooped, seized the axe lying on the ground, and aimed a stroke against the trunk of the oak:

"You leave your work half done! That's a cowardly trick; I will finish it myself!"

And with the steadiness of a man accustomed to violent exercise, he struck ten, twenty, thirty times, without stopping. The chips flew. Cloquet laughed. A panting voice from the outskirts of the clearing cried:

"Who is chopping after the signal? Didn't you hear?" One, two, three blows of the axe, even harder than the others, were the sole answer. The tree, slashed all around the foot, held up only by a hundle of fibres, broke that feeble brace, bent over and toppled forward into the open space, with its branches flung out, then, rebounding upon its broken limbs, made a half circle on itself and remained outstretched.

"All the forest has not obeyed!" said Michel, throwing down the axe.

He searched with his eyes the underbrush from whence the voice had called, but he saw no one. The man, after seeing that the infringement of the pact of servitude did not come from a member of the union, had probably rejoined his companions.

"No bad feeling is there, Cloquet?"

"Surely not, Monsieur Michel! You are not angry with me. But how pale you are? That was too much for you, that work—you look ill."

"No, it is nothing."

The young man placed his hand on his heart which was beating too rapidly. He remained an instant motionless, somewhat agitated, his lips half open, breathing regularly to calm his heart. Then he smiled again, and the anxiety disappeared.

"Till to-morrow then?"

Michel descended the wooded slope, which began there, leaped over the brook, ascended the other slope and entered a path which wound among the tall trees of eighteen years growth. The sun, between the branches, threw a shower of red gold under the trees. At times the top of the hills which lie beyond the pond of Vaux, could be seen all purple in the twilight. The uneasy forest felt sun and life dying within her. Millions of tufts of grass moved their supple arms toward him. The big birds were frightened. Already the blackbirds, with blustering cries of fear, had glided at half the height of the young trees toward the denser parts of the woods. The last thrushes flew crying about the tops of the oaks. Three times Michel had shivered at the passage of a woodcock which "sank down."

"Good-evening, Monsieur le Comte."

Michel, who had stopped at the crossing of two paths and raised his head to listen to the evening sounds, started at the guttural voice which greeted him. But recovering himself at once he recognized, almost at his feet, seated upon a stone and holding a sack between his legs, a heavily bearded tramp whom the country people feared without being able to tell why. No one knew how old the beggar was nor where he lived. People called him Le Grollier on account of the hair, black as the feathers of the rook (*grolle*), with which his face was covered, and out of the midst of which his eyes gleamed phosphorescent like those of a shepherd dog or a marauding jay. Michel touched him on the shoulder.

"Hello, Grollier," said he, "I was not expecting to see you."

"No one ever expects to see me," answered the man, blowing the smoke from his pipe. "You were listening to the birds, weren't you? It is the smallest birds who sing last."

Then, looking fixedly at Michel, who, feeling in his purse for a piece of ten sous, placed it on the motionless sleeve of the beggar, he said:

"Be on your guard against Lureux, Monsieur le Comte, be on your guard against Tournabien and Supiat, if you buy any mowing machines."

"I am not afraid of any of them, Grollier, and no one knows what I shall do. Adieu!"

He lifted his hand to his hat and walked on.

"Who the devil could have found out that I thought of buying a mowing machine for my meadows?"

Then he remembered that at the fair of Corbigny, two weeks before, he had asked about their prices from a maker of the machines. And he began to laugh. Then the other remark of Grollier: "It is the smallest birds who sing last," brought him back to what he had been thinking of before he met the beggar.

It was indeed the hour when even the small songs were coming to an end. The bullfinches, which travel in March, the chaffinches and the green linnets which fast in the winter, whistled, but without changing their day-song, in the full confidence that to-morrow would be as good, or even better, than to-day. "*Au revoir*, sun, thanks for the first buds! Under our wings,

we feel the tide of youth already beating, the leaves of the coming spring that are pushing out toward the light, the sap that is moving in the hidden passages toward the openings above. *Au revoir*, sun! To-morrow, when you come to life again, how many perfumes, how many new buds, and how many gnats there will be for us!" They glided away, one by one, toward the thorn thickets, and became perfectly silent. The sun had gone below the horizon. Then the last birds sang their adieu to the day. First the red-breasts, then the tomtits, and all the tribe of climbers, those seekers after lichens, explorers of tree barks, tiny bundles of gray feathers never at rest while the light lasts, and whose shrill little cries are the last of all the songs of the daylight animals.

Michel knew all these things. He felt approaching from the far horizon that breath of warm wind, that kiss which, every evening, floats through the air, crosses the woods, rolls over the meadows and, in its passing, touches all life, wherever it may be. He opened his lips and lungs to that rare breath, which renewed his whole being. Then he continued on his way.

The light, now, was passing away above the forests. For an instant, through the opening of a path, he saw the still glistening waters of the pond of Vaux, with its five branches like a maple leaf, making a star in the gloom of the forest. Then he left the path which he had followed up to that point and turned to the left into a clearing which he crossed rapidly, and, scaling a steep

embankment of mossy earth, found himself at the edge of one of the principal boundaries of the forest of Fonteneilles.

"Ah! Here you are, father! I am not late, am I?"

"Prompt as a soldier, like myself; I have just arrived."

Upon a strip of pebbly earth between the slopes of grass the General was waiting for Michel, at the rendezvous which the latter had made. They had been separated all the afternoon, until they met at this crossing of two forest roads, one of which led to the château, while the other, sloping to the West, went straight to the village of Fonteneilles. The father and son intended to return together, and Monsieur de Meximieu was to leave immediately for Corbigny. The General, standing on the edge of one of his clearings, elegant, graceful and haughty, recalled those portraits of gentlemen whom artists usually paint with an ample and unstudied background of scenery, to symbolize their riches and glory. He was tall in stature, very slender still in spite of his sixty-three years, the handsomest general officer in the army, so the saying was. He had a small head, black mustache, gray goatee, hair cropped short and almost white, features firm and clean-cut, a vigorous nose, thin and slightly curved in the Spanish style, a full chest and straight and tapering legs, "not an ounce of fat and not a twinge of rheumatism," the General affirmed. As he had gone for a ride after breakfast he still wore the costume which all Parisians, who are used to morning rides in the Bois, know well: a

round hat, a blue cravat with wide ends, a jacket and riding trousers of gray English cloth, while his riding boots made the sole brilliant note in the dull tone of the dress and the landscape. He had on red gloves, and his gold-topped riding crop of twisted osier was stuck in his right boot. The General let his son approach him without making a movement himself; he was preoccupied; he turned his back to the château, and looked obstinately, with an air of defiance and contempt, in the direction of the southeast, toward the pointed arch formed by the leafless oaks above the forest path.

"Did you hear that?" he asked.

"What?"

"What they are singing. Listen, they are coming!"

The force of the wind, and the irregularities of the ground, had prevented Michel from hearing. He heard this time. In the woods, to the left, strong, ardent, musical voices were chanting the *Internationale*. Nearly all the words were lost in the wooded solitudes, but some of them reached distinctly the ears of the two men standing, side by side, on the border of the wood, and facing the sound which grew louder.

"*Les canailles!*" exclaimed the General. "Can one sing such horrors!"

"They are drunk."

"That is one more vice."

"With the hatred which has been poured out to them by the glassful. But how many of them saw only the label! It was fine."

"You think so? The murder of their officers?"

"No, the brotherhood."

"Listen!"

The wood-cutters approached, their voices borne along on the cold wind. At times the sound was like a hymn across the forest; it sounded with the same breadth, and long, resonant tones. The approaching night made the world attentive. Suddenly a group of men filed out from the left, in a straight line almost perpendicular to that where Monsieur de Meximieu and his son were standing. They were marching without order; one of them carried a bugle slung crosswise; several had poles on their shoulders, the "flag-staff" which they brought back from the cutting and whose flexible end beat on the leaves of the path behind them. The president of the union of the wood-cutters of Fonteneilles, Ravoux, was at the head, a pale man with a black beard, a theorist, a cold enthusiast, who did not sing and whose eyes had already discovered the two men. By his side two young men strode along laughing as they sang. Then came Lureux, with an enormous flag-staff, then half a score more, with scarred faces, animated or spiritless, wet with perspiration and powdered with fragments of leaves. There were young men, and men of mature age, all dressed in dull colours, wearing caps or hats of soft felt, all carrying game bags or lunch bags puffed out on one side by an empty quart bottle and pieces of uneaten bread. When they filed out on the cross road and saw the two men standing motionless at the entrance of the road to Fonteneilles, they

hesitated. The young men who were walking in front stopped singing, open mouthed. But Ravoux, who until then had not joined in the singing, took up the couplet with a metallic voice that was rough like a sprig of ash.

His companions followed his lead. A flash of joy gleamed in the eyes of the men, the unwholesome joy of vexing and insulting the adversary with impunity. They passed along. Nearly all, however, raised their hats and Ravoux was of the number. Several said, interrupting their singing: "Good-evening, gentlemen." They passed on in the direction of the village and then another band still more numerous came by.

"They are returning from my woods," said the Marquis de Meximieu, "and they insult those who give them their bread? Do you know these fellows?"

Their heads were appearing out of the shadow, one by one.

"All of them," replied Michel.

The men advanced, shouting or silent, lifting their hats or remaining covered.

The young man named them as fast as they passed: Lampoignant, Trépard, Dixneuf, Bélisaire, Paradis, Supiat, Gilbert Cloquet—who turned his head to the other side of the wood, but saluted all the same—Fontroubade, Méchin, Padovan, Durgé, Gandhon.

"Gandhon? Stop! I know him myself. One of my cavalry men five years ago! You shall see that I know how to treat them! Gandhon?"

A man stepped out from the band, a large, red-

haired man with laughing, shifty eyes, who, in spite of the cold, had rolled up his shirt sleeves above the elbow and had his vest, which was fastened by a button at the neck, floating out behind.

"Well, Gandhon, is it you, the trooper of the first class of the 3rd squadron at Vincennes? I knew you, I recognized you."

The man had uncovered as he came up.

"Yes, General."

"Well and good; you do not remain covered like those unmannerly fellows who pass me as if I were a post. You have become a sort of amateur striker, have you?"

"No, I am not on strike, for the moment."

"Understand well. I do not reproach you for striking. It is your right; my family also is on strike."

The wood-cutter shrugged his shoulders, laughing.

"You are joking, General!"

"Not a bit of it. The only difference is that my family has been striking for four hundred years, and has taken advantage of that fact to serve the country almost gratuitously in the army, in the church, and in diplomacy. We have not changed our masters nor our song. It is always France. But you, let us see, do you still remember the regiment?"

"Yes, General."

"You remember our manœuvres in September? And the charges? And the review?"

"Yes, General."

"Was the regiment badly commanded, badly fed, badly treated?"

The man took a moment for reflection before answering, for he felt that "politics" came into this. He replied:

"General, we were well treated. I have nothing to complain of."

"You see, Michel, you see. He has been formed in my school, this man here; he has good sense! Now, Gandhon, admit it, you are wrong to side with those rebels there. Tell me."

"It is our party."

"Of disorder?"

"Possibly!"

The man was now on his guard, and his face, which had been smiling with embarrassment, became hard and defiant. The General held his head erect. Between his son and the wood-cutter he resembled a tall forest oak between two young trees. His arm was outstretched, as if he were giving a command in the barrack yard.

"I do not want you to tie yourself up with such rabble, Gandhon! I know you, you're a hot-headed fellow, but, if the army is mobilized, we shall march side by side, and of what you were singing, you do not mean a word."

There was no reply.

The General grew pale. He took a step forward.

"It is not possible! You, my soldier! Come, shake your General by the hand!"

The wood-cutter drew back sneering. His companions were waiting for him, and they were watching him. All at once he turned slowly on

his heels and started on in the path of his comrades.

"But, General, the regulations forbid treating soldiers as equals!"

"It is from friendship, you know well!"

"I do not want your friendship!"

Then Gandhon ran with long awkward strides on account of his wooden shoes, toward a group of his comrades who were standing some fifty yards away. They resumed their march, and a young voice started again one of the spiteful couplets of the spiteful song. Through the immense delusive peace of the forest, the words passed on to tell in all the distant places that the fiercest political passions had invaded the country.

When the noise of the steps and voices had died away, General de Meximieu stopped looking at the blue shadow into which all this bad dream had vanished, and he regarded his son, who was standing at his right, his son who was less tall than he, less handsome, less prepared, it seemed, for a life of struggle, of daring, and of defiance. Although the shadows were heavy, Michel felt the disdainful compassion, the kind of disavowal which had always crushed his youth.

"Well, my boy, your trade is not a merry one with brutes such as these people!"

"What do you expect? It is the coming to a head——"

"Of what?"

"Of many mistakes. No one of us is without responsibility."

"That is not so! I have none! I do not want

any of your responsibilities! Tell me which mine were? What a wretched people! Good for nothing! They have no more love for France than my Arabs of Blida had. And you defend them!"

For the second time Michel felt himself enveloped by a contempt which included everything about him, his ideas, his profession, his mediocre physique, his silence of a few moments ago which the General must have thought came from fear. He could not call up the strength which he always promised himself to have for discussing, refuting, and explaining in order to be respectful toward his father and consistent with his own ideas.

"Come, father," he said, "since you must be in Paris by to-morrow, come."

He drew up the collar of his coat. The General at once unbuttoned his jacket. Both began to walk along the forest road that led toward the château. It was very cold; the wind had already taken from the branches the warmth which the day had left there. It turned back the twigs, and bent down the small branches, drawing from them a wail as dreary as that from a desolate life. The pungent odor of the dead leaves rose in the dusk. Above the branches, the sky was light, and the stars were beginning to peep out.

"Will you come back?" asked Michel; "I have scarcely had time to see you."

"My post at Paris is extremely exacting, my dear fellow. And then there is always the world, social obligations. I always hesitate to take any leave. However, you told me that the wood

merchant agreed to pay for the newly marked oaks, even before cutting them?"

"Yes."

"I will come back again then, for the settlement on the 31st. You have marked all the old trees in the two clearings?"

"Nearly all."

"How do you mean, nearly? I must have the thirty thousand francs which I have asked you for, in four different payments, and, if possible, in two. Are they there?"

Michel made an evasive gesture.

"I tell you it is absolutely necessary that I should have them!" repeated General de Meximieu, raising his voice. "It is for you to find them; you will go back to-morrow to the clearing, and if there are not enough old trees, have half-grown ones cut; if there are not enough of them, still younger ones."

"No, father."

The two men stopped there in the middle of the woods, in the wind, forgetful both of them of the hour which urged departure. The Marquis de Meximieu's hand—a bundle of steel cords through which an electric current passed—came down upon Michel's shoulder.

"Who is the master here? I am not in the habit of repeating my commands."

General de Meximieu saw, turned toward him, a face as firm and as harsh in expression as even his own could be.

"It is impossible, father. How are you considering the future of the estate?"

"It belongs to me, I believe."

"You forget that it is also my future, and that my life is here, and that I can not ruin the woods."

The General's only response was to resume his walk, saying:

"I have only one reason to give you and that is worth all the others: I must have the money."

They continued to walk rapidly in the twilight, without talking any more. In a little while the forest grew more open; the lofty trees separated into gigantic wings, bristled to the top by the wind, and between their ranks, upon the swollen soil which they must have occupied for a long time, Fonteneilles appeared in the twilight, in the midst of the open and rising fields. It was a château of the eighteenth century, built upon a terrace; one single story, with seven windows in the façade, rose above the ground floor, and above that was a sloping roof of tiles with two round towers, capped with pointed roofs which, however, were no higher than the rest of the building. These towers formed the projecting mass at the two ends; but they did not prolong the façade, which kept its severe, compact and settled aspect. The two men crossed a small grass plot and mounted the steps of the little stone stairway which led to the terrace where, in summer, the boxes of orange-trees were placed in line, and then, as they turned to the right, they saw in the court the lanterns of the victoria which was waiting. During the walk General de Meximieu had

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changed his humour but not his ideas. He had seen so little of his son during these twenty-four hours of his stay at Fonteneilles! A crowd of unasked questions rose in his mind. At the corner of the château where the wall descended obliquely and penetrated the damp soil, he stopped and turned to Michel.

"Are you on good terms with your neighbours?"

"Neither good nor bad; I only meet them at the fairs."

"Those are a queer kind of festivities and hardly what one would call social. Do you ever see Jacquemin, the lieutenant, who used to serve under my command?"

"Yes, I have met him; Vaucreuse is so near. I have even called upon him."

"Apparently he makes farming pay. He's a shrewd fellow."

"He is very unpretending."

"He has a daughter, who, they say, is pretty. Is it true?"

"She's just a child; seventeen or eighteen years old."

"Fair, like her mother, is she not?"

"Yes; a rare blond, the colour of wheat sheaves, red gold and yellow gold together."

"Why! You are a connoisseur, my boy! *Sapristi*, but the mother was pretty! Poor woman! I remember her one evening, at the Monthuilé's; she was not exactly beautiful, but she was full of grace and joy and life."

"You knew her well?"

"No; I just admired her in passing, bowed to

her, and dreamt about her like so many others. And the new priest, what is his name?"

"Roubiaux."

"He can not have had a very pleasant time in his six months here! But I wager that you two get along well together. Possibly you are the most clerical of the two?"

"I'm not sure," said Michel seriously; "we have never had any talk on religious subjects. But he made rather a good impression on me."

"Well, so much the better. He's a little Morvandian, isn't he? Quite dark?"

"Yes."

"Who has ears without a rim and a sun-burned skin? Deucedly timid?"

"Not when it is necessary to hold his own."

"He must be the one I passed yesterday on the way here. He has abominable parishioners."

The General found his purse and took from it a hundred-franc note.

"Tell me, Michel, would you like to give him that for his charities? Do not mention me. It is not worth while. But I come so rarely to Fonteneilles that the least I can do is to leave something for the poor."

In taking the note, Michel pressed the hand of his father, who went right on:

"You know that I do not like effusiveness. There is no use in thanking me. What? More repairs? I have no time now to talk to you about them. Are they pressing ones?"

"Unfortunately, yes! I wrote you about them."

"But, my dear fellow, I have seen everything! The roof, the stables, the saddle-room, the roof of the piggery, the stable-boy's room—everything. It must all be put off until the end of the month. Adieu!"

General de Meximieu jumped quickly into the carriage:

"Drive fast, Baptiste. — To the station of Corbigny!"

He leaned out of the carriage.

"Tell me, Michel, can you hire autos at Corbigny?"

"Yes."

"I shall hire one the next time, then. The age of "victorias" is passed. Adieu!"

The carriage was already climbing the avenue. One after the other, under the light of the lanterns, the spotted trunks of the beeches came out from the shadows and disappeared. At last the victoria turned to the right and was lost behind the hedges of the road.

Immediately after a very short dinner—at a table set for one in the middle of the big dining-room, beneath the two chandeliers, veiled in yellow gauze, which had lighted fifty guests in former days—Michel went to his room. He followed the corridor of the first floor to the end and pushed open the last door at the right. He had groped his way in the darkness and he crossed the room in the same manner to the window which looked out on the short semi-circular meadow and upon the forest, and leaned out.

The cold seemed to have grown less, because

the wind had died down. The waning moon was just rising and already began to mingle its light with that of the stars, and scarves of mist stretching over the forest, the ponds and the meadows, shone like white snow or like new furrows covered by the hoar frost of the morning.

Youth stirred in Michel's veins. He shivered with the love which is born from the meeting of the soul with the life that is really made for it. Without opening his lips and heard by no one, he called to the forest: "I am sad at heart to have to lessen your beauty!" And his heart, closed to men, was at last free to bewail itself. "To have to cut down oaks, again and again! The aged ones, the half grown, and the young trees! and I can not refuse. I am not the master. Yet even the forest itself can not suffice for this perpetual need of money. It is being sacrificed, dishonoured. It is the future that I am destroying. Soon there will be no forest, merely the underbrush without a single head to tower above the others, not even a dead trunk on which a passing falcon can rest! And that is my work! All the rest, my efforts, improvements, new methods, machinery, my father does not even ask about. When he is told, he gives neither thanks nor approval. I will speak to him when he comes back. If he should tell me then that he would give up to me a part of the estate in full ownership, as he led me to think he would do when I came to live here!—the farm of Fonteneilles, for instance. I could live and I should be sure of succeeding. I would pledge myself, if they wanted me to,

to repair the château. But how to make my father listen to me! Shall I ever succeed? Perhaps. This is what I shall do."

The young man continued to dream, and to make plans for his future. He had good reason for doing so. No one ever planned for him. And he knew that he would only have a few moments to explain his plan, and to receive his reply, good or bad. People were rarely able to discuss any subject whatever with General de Meximieu. Neither soldier, nor civilian, neither his chief nor his family, could flatter themselves that they had explained any idea freely and completely before this man who was always in a hurry, who understood too quickly, who walked while he talked, interrupted, remembered, found a quick conclusion and often a just one, and was contented to hold it. He had no idea of economy of any sort, but acted entirely on impulse, with a habit of spurring, galloping, and then turning short. Those who knew him slightly thought this was cleverness; those who knew him well knew that it was his nature, a vagabond way that was tyrannical toward himself, of spending the force of a body which did not grow old and of a mind which had not matured. He was perpetually in movement, made to act and to hurry along, but he was not a judge who could weigh two opinions. The faculty of judgment had remained rudimentary with him; the delay which it necessitated appeared to him to be weakness. He had no taste for home life, just as he had no feelings of intimacy. This was one of the reasons which had prevented him

from understanding Michel and from being understood by him.

It is true, there was another reason which had kept this father and son strangers to each other and constantly irritated by the feeling of distance and of something not understood which separated them. Several times, in recent years, the papers had published the official notice of General de Meximieu's service. A career of rapid promotion, in which influence had had only a secondary place. It was as follows: "Philippe de Meximieu, born at Paris, November 15, 1843; graduated from the school of Saint-Cyr in 1864, was appointed Second Lieutenant of the 5th Dragoons, at Pont-à-Mousson; Lieutenant in the same regiment, at Maubeuge, in 1870; wounded in the war, mentioned in the order of the day and decorated; Captain in the 2nd Dragoons, at Chartres, in 1871; Chief of Squadron in the 5th Chasseurs of Africa, at Blida, in 1881; Lieutenant-Colonel of the 6th Cuirassiers at Cambrai in 1887; Colonel of the 1st Cuirassiers at Paris in 1892; General commanding the Brigade of Dragoons at Vincennes in 1897; General of division, commanding the 1st division of cavalry at Paris, in 1901."

It was at Chartres, in 1879, that Captain de Meximieu married Benoîte de Magny. He was over thirty-five. She was twenty-seven. Michel was born the following year, and, a little later, the Captain, who had been appointed Chief of Squadron, was sent to Blida. He had "asked for Africa" once. They gave it to him when he no longer wanted it. But he did not hesitate a moment

about starting. Madame de Meximieu, however, refused to follow him. She gave as a reason the health of their child. There was no discussion. "As you like; I am a soldier; I march to the sound of the bugle as you to that of the piano." But their life together was ended. Madame de Meximieu established herself in Paris, in an apartment in the same house where her mother, Madame de Magny, lived. Six years passed in this way, and at the end of that time, Monsieur de Meximieu being ordered to Cambrai, she obtained even more easily than at first, and as a matter of no importance to her husband, what she called "an extension of leave."

The habit of living apart was formed on both sides. When the officer returned to Paris to command the 1st Cuirassiers, he found his son no longer a child, and the time for making plans about his education had passed forever. The decisive period was over. Eleven years do not make a man, but they determine his destiny. Michel was not fitted either physically or morally to be the soldier who should continue the tradition of his race. A kind of melancholy, a mute and haughty sensitiveness, and the already developed power of suffering alone, showed a difference of character between son and father, and son and mother, which the early training had increased. Michel, entrusted at first to governesses, had just then been placed, as day-scholar, in the Chaperot Institute, an "old family school," the prospectus said, established in the "Ternes" quarter, and under the direction of an association

of professors and lay-tutors. The choice of this neutral establishment, midway between the Catholic college and the Lycée, had been made by mutual agreement between Monsieur and Madame de Meximieu. The latter had herself selected the Chaperot Institute, whose chaplain she knew, who was also a non-resident and watched. Michel used to start off early in the morning and come home only to find his mother getting ready to go out, five days out of seven. The Colonel dined later than his wife, or dined at his club. The child had had, from his earliest years, the feeling that he was in the way. This thought continued to weigh on him as he grew up. At eighteen, his trouble was clearly defined. On the day following his baccalaureate examinations, in the evening—how clearly he remembered the details; the hour, which the Buhl clock marked; the half circle of chairs just as they had been left by visitors who had filed in all the afternoon; his father standing, leaning against the mantelpiece; his mother seated in a blue easy chair—he had suffered another examination, shorter but more severe. "Well! Michel, what career do you choose? There is only one which I forbid you; the army. Why? It is no longer what it was, and then, you are not cut out for a soldier!" A glance had completed the thought, the cruel thought. The child had not become the demi-god they had dreamed of. He did not appear to belong to the traditionally handsome race of the Meximieu; he would never be the elegant cavalier, the born man of war, the pride of his soldiers and secret

admiration of the multitude, like General Philippe de Meximieu, like his grandfather, and his great grandfather and the Field Marshall to whom Louis XIV. had said: "Meximieu, there is only one of the Queen's maids of honour who can boast a better shaped waist than you." Michel had understood the implication. "Be reassured," he had answered, "I shall be a farmer."

He had determined on this career long before they had asked him for a reply. He loved, with a love inherited no doubt from distant ancestors, and with the love of a child whose world has laughed at him, the forests, the grass, the solitude which the peasants who pass by do not disturb, and the château in which some memories of the past of the family survived. He wished to take up again the tradition of a number of his ancestors, the noble and useful rôle of a liberal and educated land-holder, to restock the forests, to refill the stables, to introduce new methods of agriculture, to serve the soil, and, through it, France. The only happy days which he remembered were the three or four weeks of the early Autumn passed every year at Fonteneilles on the return from the season at Trouville.

Very soon after this conversation which decided his career, Michel left for the north, and studied at the school of agriculture which the Brothers of the Christian Doctrine directed at Beauvais. The following year he performed his military service at Bourges. And, at last, in the middle of November, 1900, he arrived at Corbigny. On a dreamy, golden day he crossed the

forest of Fonteneilles; he lifted his hat on seeing the roofs of the abandoned château; he listened with ecstasy to the noise of the shutters, which the guard Renard pushed open one after the other; he entered; he caressed the stones of the wall; he was at home.

Five years had passed! How much work! How many undertakings! What consoling intimacy between the soil and the child of the ancient race who had returned to it! Five rapid, full years, without incident; the time to learn his trade, to lessen some of the prejudices and the enmities which had grown up during his absence and to plan for the future and to taste all the sunshine and all the shadow of home. And now Monsieur de Meximieu threatened to ruin it all with his demands for money. It was the estate which needed capital; it was the château.

The light grew clearer over the forest, and the floating fringes of mist were touched by the light from the red ball of the moon between the hills. A dog was barking like mad far off, toward the lake of Vaux. The swift flight of birds of passage or of prey whispered through the night.

How could he secure from the General any assurance for his own future? Who was there who could speak to him? Who? Possibly Madame de Meximieu. She had always been kind, that mother still blond and pretty in spite of her fifty years and very kind. Naturally she had no right to give away the farm and château which did not belong to her. But she would not refuse to intervene and to plead for him. She was

clever at recommending the young officers who confided their interests to her; was it not Michel's turn now? She would surely not object. She loved her son with an affection which, if inactive, was still real. For a long time she had held it against him that he was not a daughter, a daughter whom she could have spoiled, adored, and kept near her. But since Michel had been living at Nièvre, her affection and her desire to see and encourage her son had brought her twice to Fonteneilles. Neither the forests nor the meadows had any attractions for her; she had a horror of the country: yet what pleasant walks they had had, what eagerness she had shown to learn about rural things! "You must show me your Rambouillet ram. — Explain to me the difference between an oak and a beech tree. — Can't you have some grain sowed before me? — They say that it is a very pretty sight."

Yes, she would be his ally in this affair. Through her or through some other means the estate must be protected and kept in his hands. There lay the possibility of wealth in the future and perhaps happiness! Also the certainty of a useful life! The vision of the band of wood-cutters, chanting the *Internationale* and provoking General de Meximieu, the military chief, the rich descendant of a feudal race, passed through the young man's mind. His mouth drooped, and with a sad smile he gazed out into the night at the waving phantoms of those ancestral trees under which but a short time ago the song of hatred had sounded.

"What am I good for?" he murmured. "I did not want to come here, just to shut myself up here, to live and die here for myself alone; I wished, I always do wish for the uplifting of these men of the soil. What moral good have I done so far? What influence have I gained? What friendship from a single one of them? Think of that procession of men this evening. My father's words, which were really so noble, and that reply of Gandhon, who was a soldier only yesterday! Ah! I know well that this is not the whole of France, that it is only a corner of the country more undermined than the others by evil, more debased by jealous passion, but still. — How good it must have been in old times to live in a sound, healthy nation! With the same faith! The same festivals! Where words meant the same thing to everybody. What a spring of intelligence and of love has been lost! And they do not know it. I see them swallow the poison, and laugh, and sing, while they are already pallid with approaching death! Ah, these poor people, who proclaim their disease as a victory!"

Michel straightened himself up and listened a moment; then something within him spoke, and said:

"After all, I belong altogether to them! It must be! I love them!"

The night grew soft, and a peace unknown to the day descended on the deserted fields.

Some hundred yards distant from the window where Michel was dreaming, in a shadowy fold of the mist, a little village slept, its fires out. There

were five houses in all, three on the left of the forest path and two on the right. In one of them, a poor man was also thinking. It was Gilbert Cloquet, and the thought which held him was that of poverty. Lying on his wooden bed, between the wall and the hearth, he was thinking of "his affairs" which were going badly. He earned less than he needed. "It is true," he said to himself, "that I have enough bread and even stew to eat with it; it is also true that I can always buy what wine I want from the lock-keeper of the canal"—the sourish odour from the little cask wedged in a corner of the room floated through the place, mingled with the remains of the smoke—"but I need some new Sunday clothes and I can not buy them. That is no great misfortune. The trouble comes from something else. It comes from Marie. She is extravagant; she is always coming to me and saying: 'Father, I have no more grain for the poultry! Father, the baker refuses us credit. We are behind in the rent. The proprietor of Epine is going to attach us!' To attach the house of the daughter of Gilbert Cloquet! No, I will never allow that. First thing to-morrow I will take Marie half of the twenty francs which I have received for the work which I have not yet begun in the woods. And then, when the grass is high enough, I will go to Monsieur Michel and hire myself out to cut his hay."

The labourer turned over in bed trying to escape the depressing thoughts which had kept him awake for hours. He heard the dog of his neighbours, the Justamond's, barking at the

dead leaves blown about by the wind, or at the passage of some prowling animal. Then absolute silence fell. The cold dew outside stiffened the grass. The poor man went on thinking: "There is no one who cares for me, except Monsieur Michel, who gives me as much work as he can; and yet, he is a nobleman, and they say that noblemen are no good."

II.

THE INNER LIFE OF A POOR MAN.

Gilbert Cloquet had been at the public school of Fonteneilles about 1860, and oh! how long ago that was! He had learned to read, to write, to count, and to-day, a man of fifty, although he barely knew how to write any more, for want of practice, he still counted very well, and read, without difficulty, the papers and hand-bills and even "printed writing," which proves that his teaching had been good. He had had to recite the catechism, sometimes well, sometimes poorly, to the teacher, who showed himself as exacting for that lesson as for the others, and who liked to have him recite it word for word. There were occasionally paternal visits of inspection from the priest of that time, who asked a few questions encouraged them, told them a story and then went away congratulating the master, and after an examination and a short review of the catechism before his first communion, Gilbert Cloquet had been judged, by the highest authorities whom he knew, sufficiently equipped to live honestly, to resist all evil from without and from within, and later to bring up the children who might be born to him.

"You are a grown boy now, my Gilbert," said

his mother to him one day; "you are eleven years old, and you must begin to earn your living. We will go to the hiring at Bazolles, although it makes my heart ache to send you away from me."

The hiring took place, as was the custom at Bazolles, on the following Sunday, which was that before the Feast of Saint John, just as at Corbigny it is held on the Thursday before Corpus Christi. The sloping market-place, and the road which crossed it as a river crosses a lake, were crowded with farmers, who had come to find labourers, and with young people who wanted to "hire themselves out." The young men who wanted a place as carter had a whip hung around their neck; those who would be field labourers were biting a green leaf or wore one on their hat; the girls held a rose in their hand, and they were poorly dressed, in their worst gown, so that people would not think them extravagant; but each of them had, wrapped up in a handkerchief and put away in a corner of the neighbouring inn, a gown for the dance and a bit of ribbon to tie in her bodice. Each one had brought with her a relative, her mother or an aunt or a friend. And Gilbert had near him his mother, anxious, with her eyes red, and well wrapped up in her "mourning cloak," old Mère Cloquet, who was known all through Bazolles and Fonteneilles, and even beyond, as a poor, but industrious, economical and tidy woman. He was certainly one of the youngest there, as the majority of the servants ranged from fifteen to twenty years old and several even were men grown who wanted to change their places for

reasons of fancy or money, and the little fellow motionless at the foot of the steps of the tobacco shop—a good place which his mother had chosen—asked himself if there would be any master who would want him; a little fellow of eleven years, in wooden shoes, and a blue blouse with white buttons, with a face like that of a fair and freckled girl, but with keen, observing eyes of limpid blue beneath the shadow of his wide hat. Who would come to hire him? And his little wrinkled, shrivelled mother, even smaller than her boy and trembling for a gesture which should choose him, wondered anxiously who would be the first to accost her and to discuss with her the conditions of the hiring?

It was one of the largest farmers of Fonteneilles, Monsieur Honoré Fortier, a man twenty-six years old, who had just come into the property of his father, and who managed the hundred acres of La Vigie.

"Has he ever looked after cows?" he inquired.

"Often, Monsieur Fortier," replied Gilbert's mother, with a curtsey. "He is not afraid of them, and his ambition is to plough soon."

"He is not old enough for that, my good woman, but the lad does not displease me."

He looked Gilbert over, as he would have done a colt, took the measure of his chest with his eye, felt of his arm, took him by the shoulder and shook him to see if he was vigorous; then said, brusquely:

"Ten francs a month, to begin, Mère Cloquet?"

"That suits me, Monsieur Fortier. Take off your hat, Gilbert, since Monsieur Fortier does you this honour."

The farmer drew from his pocket a five franc piece and placed it in her hand; then, looking into the eyes of the boy, who had lifted his hat:

"Listen well, shepherd; two years, ten years, twenty years you can stay with me, if you wish to; you will make your way; I make one condition only, it is that you shall obey."

Gilbert shook the hand of Monsieur Fortier, and left Bazolles to go and get his clothes, for that very evening he must go to La Vigie.

"Are you content?" asked his mother.

"Well enough."

"You have not said a word."

"There was no need," replied the boy.

This was all quite natural. He was a Nivernais, the country where wills are strong, even violent, but where the face is expressionless and the tongue generally quiet.

From that time, La Vigie became Gilbert's home. It was a farm resting proudly on the summit of a round, treeless hill, nearly a thousand feet high, with one hundred acres of good land on level slopes; a farm which the wind enveloped as a lighthouse and from which the view extended in a circle. To the North one could see Beaulieu upon its blue-tinged ridge; to the West and to the South there lay a valley of grass and fields, and beyond Crux-la-Ville, a forest rising like an enormous and long wave ready to break into foam, and bearing on its crest the ragged fir trees of an

old manorial park; on the East side there stretched a landscape so vast that even the eyes of its children have never known it all, forests again, that of Fonteneilles, and that of Vaux with its village of Vorroux, sparkling like a wild poppy in the leaves, with the bend of the great ponds hidden by the lofty forest trees, and beyond a hollow like a great shell, with a succession of slopes which seem to be only trees, and which rise from story to story and from green softness to blue softness, up to the hills of the Morvan, rounded, transparent and changing all day long with reflections from the depth of the sky.

The beauty of this landscape had mysterious charm for the shepherd of La Vigie, the little Cloquet who was cutting his teeth, and whose eye, getting keener in the open air, could discover a goshawk floating half-way from Collancelle. He had been quick to learn his trade and to wish for another, the work of the young men, to drive horses, or to crack his whip at the head of the yoked oxen, singing when the white beasts, Griveau, Chaveau, Montagne, and Rossigneau, slackened on the chain, to harrow, to cut the green forage and to do his part in the harvest season. He went up one grade and was better paid. He had to work hard, so that Monsieur Honoré Fortier could pay his rent, which was ten thousand francs. And he wanted for nothing. The master was harsh and always on hand. He governed his large household with the help of Madame Fortier, who was equally serious and severe. The master himself acted as a kind of overseer presiding at the ser-

vant's table, when there were four farm hands, a shepherd, a maid servant, without counting the day-labourers whom they hired at the time of the heavy work. For ten, twelve and even fourteen hours the soil absorbed all the powers of body and mind of the men. How should it help yielding a harvest? At the meals, which were taken in the kitchen adjoining the master's room, Gilbert listened in silence to the workmen. They talked about the work, the price of hay and current prices at the fairs, repeated scandalous gossip, or told coarse stories or amusing ones, and they rarely spoke of politics. The oldest, who had served in the army, put no restraint on their talk. There was never a word which could either lift, guide, or refresh the minds of these men or lessen the jealousies which divided them; nothing but orders, discipline, and a supervision of a purely external kind, and the desire each one had for his own interest to stay at La Vigie. On Sunday, those who went down to Fonteneilles did so only in the afternoon.

Only the two women who directed the farm, the wives of the master and of the overseer, went down in the morning to mass. They had all been confirmed, and that ceremony over the men at Fonteneilles, if not anti-religious, at least showed themselves no longer at church except at Easter, All Saints, at funerals, or sometimes on the 3rd of May, the day of the Finding of the Holy Cross, when the curé blessed the "little crosses" which protected the "patrimony." Monsieur Fortier himself on Sunday inspected his

lands, smoked his pipe and made up his accounts, or else he harnessed his mare to the yellow spring wagon, and went to pay a visit to some farmer or cattle merchant in the neighbourhood. Gilbert, in the beginning, usually put on his best suit and, at the first sound of the church bell, ran to join his mother in the last row of seats near the font of holy water. He liked to warn her when the sacristan passed, and to pay for the two chairs, like a man who was earning his living and who had the proper feeling. His mother thought him religious because of this. She feared indeed for the future, knowing that young boys are seldom good; that they escape even from mothers who are near enough to watch over them, and that they can easily deceive mothers who are far away. But she showed her uneasiness only by a few words spoken low to Gilbert, and the troubled look in her eyes even when she smiled at him. Her look was that of the Ave Maria, which she often recited, awake or half asleep, always with the same vision of her child growing up and adventurous. "Happily he loves me!" she thought. Her husband also had loved her and that gave her a little confidence in the men of her house.

At La Vigie, the seasons passed and repassed quickly, changing upon the sides of the hill, from the green of the pastures to the violet of the fresh fallow lands, the pale yellow of the oats and the red gold of the wheat. At dawn, Monsieur Fortier, standing in the court, among the labourers and the wagons, would sometimes say:

"Well, boys, there's a hard day's work before

us! If the field is all plowed this evening, I'll pay for a round of red wine! Who is going to get my hay in before the storm? Who will carry the most sacks to the granary? Who will dare to climb to the top of the chestnut tree and knock the chestnuts down?"

At those times, Gilbert was the first to come or to go, or to volunteer, one of the most skilful and the most enduring. The blond little boy had become a tall, fair young man, who was serious, habitually a little absent-minded, but with eyes that would light up with an emotion or a jest, a defiance, or an order, which drew his eyebrows together and lifted up the corners of his lips under the new yellow beard. When he went to bed at night, upon the straw, in his "lair" in the old wagon box placed at the left of the stable-door, he rarely dreamed; fatigue prevented him from talking with his older companion who slept on the other side of the entrance; he slept so heavily that neither the noise of the chains, which the cows dragged or let fall upon the floor of their stalls, nor their lowing, nor the stamping of the horses in the stable nearby disturbed his rest. He was sober, partly from economy, partly because he was ambitious, and because every one in the villages notices the men who are never overcome by drink. He was chaste also, from lack of temptation, and thanks to the hard work which he did. He grew up, in fact, straight and honest, without any one being able to say: "It is on account of my influence that he is better than the others."

Until he was of age, Gilbert often greeted the curé of Fonteneilles, but only once did he see him mount to La Vigie and speak to the men assembled together. This was during the war. The abbé brought to the inhabitants of the farm a letter from an old servant, drafted from Nièvre, who wrote in a few lines some sad news. He arrived at the farm on one of the evenings of that hard winter when the setting suns were so red that mothers were frightened, and he met Gilbert Cloquet, who was bringing home the team from the plowing, in the little path leading from the road to the farm.

"Ah! Good-day, Gilbert. I see things are going well with you. How you have grown! It is a pity that one sees you so rarely at Fonteneilles!" Had the curé added: "Come sometime and talk with me! I am a friend, I assure you, and you, you are a soul, a dear child, who is entrusted to me, and who will soon have no religion left but the seed sowed at your baptism; come and see me," perhaps the young man would have gone to the priest's house. Gilbert seldom went to the village and when he did go, it was to the inn to drink a single glass with his comrades, or, sometimes on market days, which are holidays in the country, to the dancing halls or to the platforms erected in front of the houses, where the young girls of Fonteneilles, Bazolles, and Vitry-Laché, came to dance.

One could easily count the occasions on which he had found himself in the presence of the great proprietors of that region. Once, while still a boy,

he had delivered a heifer at the château of Vaucreuse. He remembered the date well; it was the 3rd of May, the day of the Finding of the Holy Cross. Madame Fortier, as soon as the morning soup had been eaten, had summoned the new drover. "You are to start for Vaucreuse, Gilbert. In going down pass by the stubble-field of Troches, and cut me there a dozen little crosses, solid ones and one particularly fine one for the hemp-field, and bring them to me when you come back. Find a boy to watch the heifer while you are having them blessed, but be careful whom you trust her to."

"I will take care, Madame Fortier," the drover had replied. And he had gone off dressed in his best blouse, leading the white heifer, and rubbing the blade of his knife on a stone to sharpen it. In the "stubble-field," he had gathered twelve sprigs of the hazel tree—the hazel is sacred, since it served as a staff to Saint Joseph on his journey—he had cut and made twelve little crosses, and one large one which still bore a tuft of leaves on the end. He had entered the church, as Madame Fortier had told him, and afterward, holding his crosses, which had been blessed by the priest, fastened in a light bundle upon his shoulder, he had continued his way toward the valley of the Aron where he could see, in the distance, the château of Vaucreuse white among the meadows. The mistress of the château was always ready to see any one who wished to speak to her. She was old Madame Jacquemin, who walked softly, spoke softly and had more will than ten men put together. While Gilbert was passing by the wall

SAINT ANTHONY'S SEMINARY

of the stable, before he had even seen her coming, she was there, examining the animal which he brought and the face of the drover. When she had looked the heifer over and had felt of it, as it stood motionless in the paved court in front of the château, she threw back her masterful head, gave a little gurgle, which was her way of laughing, and said:

"Why, you are in blossom like a bush of gorse, Gilbert Cloquet! Sixteen years old! It is the age when boys begin to be little men, and that is not saying much good of them. Luckily, my boy, you are like your mother. Try to be like her in everything, for she is an honest being, very close to God, industrious and tender to those who are not so."

Then she tapped the shoulder of the heifer.

"Now lead her to the stable. *Au revoir!*"

Gilbert had stood without making any reply, for the words had touched his heart too deeply and he watched the slender little lady go away, all in black, with her clean-cut face as white as ivory.

Some years after that—he was about twenty years old—when he was at the great fair of the 11th of November at Saint Saulge, the fair for calves, which is so important that cattle merchants are wont to say: "There is only one Saint Martin in France," he had met at the bend of a road the Marquis de Meximieu, driving up in a carriage. The Marquis, then a lieutenant of dragoons, elegant, with a slender figure, and the shoulders of an athlete, had tossed him his reins

and said, with that smile which adds so much to words, and which all Meximieus have:

"Take my mare, Gilbert, will you? I only trust men like you, who are from home. I will find you again in front of the Touchevier Hotel."

In front of the Touchevier Hotel, near the old Gothic church all incrusted with low shops, Gilbert had waited, holding the mare. And after an hour, "Monsieur Philippe," as they called him at Fonteneilles, had come back and had given a five-franc piece to the lad of La Vigie—five francs with a clasp of the hand and a glance of good humour which were well worth another hundred sous. Unhappily, the Marquis did not live at home and occupied himself solely with collecting the rents and with the price of the wood; he was an officer in a garrison, far, very far away.

And this had been all the share that Gilbert had had in the life of the "authorities" of the parish, and all of the direct evidence he had to judge them by. Fortunately, he had no time for reading, for not having any guide nor any way of choosing, he would have run every chance of spoiling his judgment, which was healthy and sound.

At this time he had already been for a year the head man on Monsieur Honoré Fortier's farm, under the orders of the overseer. His light mustache curled up at the ends, his blue eyes, in which there was fear neither of men nor of things; his tall figure; his youth, which found expression only in his strength, in the fearlessness of his walk, in the upright carriage of his head on his

shoulders, in the steady grasp of his two hands when they seized the handles of the plow, or lifted at the end of the pitchfork a double sheaf of wheat, like a bundle of rushes; his calm gayety, his reputation as a steady, well-paid young man, who knew how to save his money; his skill as a poacher, caring little for the guards, and who could offer a hare to the prettiest dancer the day of a fair; all this union of energy, health and success pleased the maidens of Fonteneilles and of the neighbouring villages.

Already more than one had let him see this, and often, when he walked away in the gloaming, his body bent forward, his feet stiffened by the furrows as he followed the team which drew and lengthened the traces: "Good evening," cried they, "Monsieur Gilbert. Are you coming on Sunday to Fonteneilles?"

"That depends," said he. On what? He did not say. And over the thorn-bushes, the white coifs watched the team going away, the youth absorbed in the work like his oxen.

Gilbert, when the men were talking around him, kept silent, unless the conversation turned upon the things of his trade, and then he became interested and talked well. What he heard them say about religion and morals, wealth and politics, disturbed his untaught honesty. He gave up, little by little, his old habits and ideas without any fuss and without boasting of the change as the others did, for he was not sure that he was doing right in changing them. He had great good faith. He yielded to slight considerations and to the gen-

eral influence, because he had little affection for anything and his strength was without guidance. This was why he had gradually given up entirely his custom of going down to Fonteneilles on Sunday morning to mass. His little old mother, standing on the high church steps, looked toward the square and waited vainly each Sunday until the last stroke of the bell. She continued to pray, and to grow old, and God without doubt would provide for her. Gilbert did not fear the game-keepers, but he did dread all of the unknown, invisible apparatus of the state represented by placards, conscription, the police and the tax collector, who stopped once a month at the inn of Fonteneilles, and by the news of the day which reached even to La Vigie. The newspapers, bought irregularly either on fair days, or from pedlers, or at the tobacco shop, were first read by Monsieur Fortier, then by Madame Fortier, and the maid-servant, then by the rest of the household, and finally, worn to tatters, and the letters all blurred by the rubbing of hands and tables, they were carried in the evening into the "lairs" and there read by the servants by the light of round lanterns. The servants read especially the serial stories because of the romance in them and the accounts of local events. The rest of the paper was merely glanced at, and it left in the minds of the men only a kind of ardent haze, a feeling of dissatisfaction and a desire for change. One single idea remained in the unnourished mind of Gilbert: the idea of justice. He applied it only to the very limited world which his eyes could

see; but, in his relations with other men, in his daily conduct, and in his manner of judging others, he showed a kind of passion for it. Some of his ancestors must have without doubt loved it; it was in his blood, this thirst for justice, which at times exalted itself into a spirit of revolt. If he saw one of his companions plowing carelessly, he grew red with anger, and led back the oxen into the furrow himself. If he heard any day-labourer at La Vigie, or the men at Fonteneilles, who were all wood-cutters in the winter months, boast of having cheated in the piling up of the wood—and of course, there were many frauds in the way of bad stacking of the fire-wood, reserved young trees from which the workmen effaced the red marks, wood which they did not count, cords of wood stuffed with chips, bundles of bark filled out by parings of the trees which had been cut in a bungling way—when he heard these boasts he would say boldly: "Who ever did that is a bad workman." And neither sneers, nor grumblings, nor abuse, made him change his opinion. As to the threats, those he never heard—they were spoken too low—for he had fists of which men were afraid, and a way of looking one in the face which showed he would follow up any provocation.

This rude and combative disposition more than once brought him into conflict with his master, who gave abrupt orders and allowed no discussion. The other labourers, who were younger than he was, did not lose the chance at these times to suggest: "Leave, Gilbert, go settle your account and begone!" and three times at least he had

said: "I will leave." But each time the hidden and deep love which he felt for La Vigie, and also the thought that his master, though arbitrary, was generally just, had kept him at the farm. Monsieur Honoré Fortier, even if he did not express it, nevertheless showed at every opportunity, the confidence which he felt in the experience and the integrity of his head man. When he sent cattle to Paris he had them taken by the well-known driver, Father Toutpetit, who, twice a week, from June to the end of November, took to Villette wagon loads of cattle, bringing back the price in small linen sacks sealed with red wax, to the cattle raisers. But when the buyer demanded that the cattle be delivered in some other part of France, and there was no driver available, Monsieur Fortier said, knowing that it pleased Gilbert: "I have some one who will take them." In this way Gilbert Cloquet made trips to Lyon, to Belfort, to Nancy and to many other places. The young man gained from this more initiative than his comrades and more authority and had some idea of the variety of the world.

At the age of twenty-four—as the son of a widow, he was exempt from military service—Gilbert passed already for a rich man. As he made good wages, five hundred francs a year ever since he was seventeen, and spent nothing, and had also inherited a small sum at the death of an uncle, an old farm hand and day-labourer at Crux-la-Ville, he had the right to choose from among the best matches of the countryside. There was great astonishment when it was learned

that Gilbert was "keeping company" with the daughter of a small shop-keeper of Fonteneilles, a dealer in barley sugar and hardware, cloth and white earthen ware. She was not rich; her father was a drunkard, and everybody knew that she had more taste for dress than for work. Still, when she passed through the square, on Sunday, dressed like a lady, her hair turned back, her brilliant eyes with shadows under them and her lips open, showing her white teeth, all the young men of the town asked laughingly: "Is it for you, Baptiste? Is it for you, Jean? Is it for you, François?" One day Gilbert, who made few jokes and contented himself with laughing, biting his blond mustache, rose in the middle of the wine shop where some thirty men were drinking, and said: "It is for me!" And immediately he crossed the road and greeted the pretty girl, and they saw them both walk off "talking." His mother was troubled when she learned that her Gilbert had chosen "one who was not his equal." She tried to struggle; but she had become so old that she could only say no at first so as to say yes afterward and to weep in secret.

She would have liked to have had the wedding in the month of May, because she was devoted to the Virgin. But the parents of the bride interfered! "Girls who marry in May," they said, "have too many children!" So it was in the beginning of June, on a brilliant day that was good for the harvest, that Gilbert Cloquet led to church the beautiful Adèle Mirette, daughter of the grocer of Fonteneilles. All the village stood at

the doors to see the newly wedded couple, the handsomest of the year, with their wedding train, which stretched along the road up the hill. A couple of very small children led the procession, to chase away misfortune from the bridal pair, then came the violin players, then Gilbert, superb, giving his arm to his mother, who tried, without success, to smile. The poor people, according to custom, had arranged along the route of the bridal party chairs covered with white linen and decorated with bouquets. And every body remarked that Mère Cloquet, the poor old woman who had only just enough to live upon, placed a piece of silver on each one of these chairs of the poor. Her heart under her forced smile was full of sorrow.

Mère Cloquet could not long bear this new trouble added to so many others. Less than two months after the marriage, she died, feeling sure that her son would be unhappy in his home. In this she was partly wrong. The coquettish young girl made a steady wife, whom no one talked about. She had loved pretty clothes especially as a means of making herself loved. Her husband would not have tolerated a rival. Possibly, too, it was a spirit of precaution as much as economy, which caused him in renting a house, to choose the hamlet of Pas-du-Loup situated in the open woods a few hundred yards from the village. He continued to work as a servant at La Vigie but he left the barn where he had slept in the straw for thirteen years and came to live in the last one of the houses of the hamlet, the one set far-

thest back in the forest, to the left. Every morning at daybreak he walked up to La Vigie; at dusk, he came back again. No one could tell whether he was happy or unhappy. People only noticed that he often returned very late from the farm, and then, after a while, that he had bought, or had given to him, no one knew which, a sheep dog named Labri with a smooth coat and eyes like burning coals, who never left him. "He tells his secrets to the dog," whispered the neighbours.

The truth is that his wife was no housekeeper. Her health was delicate, and that served, for a long time, as excuse when the soup was not ready, and when her husband found the house in disorder, the linen badly arranged in the clothes-press and his working clothes still unmended after two or three days. He loved her, with all the strength of his unspoilt youth, and she also loved him in her way. She was proud to show herself, on Sunday, by the side of the handsomest man of the country and to go with him to weddings, assemblies, and sometimes to fairs when Monsieur Fortier sent him there. She always kept the tastes acquired in her early childhood, which had been passed in a village shop, selling and gossiping. Neither the living in the forest nor the housework pleased her, and the fowls in her poultry yard did not have the well-fed comb, the shining feathers and full crop of those of her neighbour, Mère Justamond. "What can you expect?" she would always say to Gilbert when he complained. "I have no heart for anything because you are never here. Even if you worked out by the

day, as nearly all of the married men of your age do, I should have some pleasure in working with you in the garden during the slack season and in keeping your house in order; but Monsieur Honoré Fortier does not leave you even an hour for yourself; he even takes you away often on Sundays, because he says that he can trust you to look after La Vigie! Do you think that it is very amusing for me? What is the good of your money?" Gilbert pretended not to hear her; he went up to La Vigie, with his dog with the eyes like burning coals. Adèle Cloquet was not bad. She was merely what she had been made: a girl who did not understand her condition in life. On the other hand, she did believe all the superstitious stories of the neighbourhood. Not for all the wealth of the Marquis would she have been seen sewing between Christmas and New Year's Day, nor would she have washed on a "Lady's Day," she who often worked on Sunday. Omens and sorcerers made her afraid, and, when she met Grollier, she smiled at him, secretly crossing herself, so as to combat the evil eye of the tramp in two ways.

Water wears away the stone and the wind gnaws it. The complaints of Adèle wore down slowly, though without appearing to do so, the man's will. He knew very well that he would make a mistake if he left the farm where he had worked for so long, where every sod had been trodden by his sabots and turned over by his hands. The words of the woman he loved and whom he silently pitied, the talk of men of the new generation who were be-

ginning to raise their voices in the inns, changed the workman's heart. In 1883, about the middle of the hay-making, which took place early, Gilbert had a dispute with his master. He said, as he passed by an old strip of pasture land which had been turned into a meadow and was called the "*chaume basse:*"

"You want me to cut the hay here, master; it is not ripe yet."

"Yes it is. I know what I am talking about, Gilbert, and it is I who command here."

"I, too, know what I am talking about, and I will not cut hay which is not ripe. That disgusts me!"

Monsieur Honoré Fortier probably had never before been so patient; he did not reply, and let Gilbert go on, with three of the young labourers who had overheard, to a meadow higher up, where the seed at the end of the thick grass was beaded with gray dew. But in the evening, as he was coming back along the path, stretching his legs, he was rejoined by Gilbert Cloquet who was walking rapidly with his scythe on his shoulder.

"You are warm, it seems to me, Gilbert?"

"And something more than that."

"That is?"

"That I am going to leave La Vigie at Saint John's Day." Monsieur Honoré Fortier stopped short. His strong, smooth-shaven face, sharpened by sudden anger, grew ten years older.

"This is the fourth time that you have said that, Gilbert, and that is enough. Why are you leaving?"

"To be my own master."

"Be your own master, then! I will be so no longer! Die of hunger if that suits you! But remember well what I am saying to you! Neither at the present time, nor when you are old, will I ever take you back again."

"I shall never come back, Monsieur Fortier."

"Not if you should go down on your knees, there on the ground! Come in to La Vigie, I will settle your account now. Not at Saint John's Day. Immediately!"

Gilbert went on ahead of his master, and while he was walking away, taking short steps to show that he was not afraid, he heard rolling over the furrows after him:

"Nineteen years of friendship! Nineteen years of good pay! You will regret your master, Gilbert Cloquet!"

A little farther on he heard again:

"You are doing me an injury, you are unjust!"

Then Gilbert, furious, turned his head.

"I forbid you to say that!" he cried. "I am doing what I have a right to do. I am not doing you any injury! You will replace me!"

But the voice from below replied:

"Good servants cannot be replaced every day in the week. Yes, you are doing me a great wrong, and because you are going away without any reason you are behaving unjustly!"

The words were lost over the furrows and the men said no more to each other.

That evening for the last time Gilbert followed the path leading from the farm to the village. His

heart beat as he approached Pas-du-Loup. A torpor lay over all the land after the heat of the day. Even the aspen leaves were at rest. The man went down with glad pride, regretting nothing and he saluted the invisible house, hidden by the tall forest trees. "I shall be able to watch my little girl grow up," he said. A little daughter had been born to him four years before. He loved her passionately, but during the week he saw her only in her sleep, for he went to his work too early and returned too late to find little Marie's eyes still open. She had been one of the reasons for the resolution which he had just taken, and the only one which he acknowledged to himself. When he reached the cottage the little one was playing on the door step. She turned her back. Her father lifted her up, startled, in his arms and kissed her noisily.

"It is a day-labourer, little Marie, who is kissing you! You will get to know me now!"

A new era began then for Gilbert Cloquet. He was thirty years old. His strength was known, and so was his honesty as a workman; people wanted him at once on the farms and in the forests. He had his work engaged for more days than any one of his many companions who hired themselves out. The steward of the Marquis de Meximieu engaged him for the hay-making; others hired him for the harvest. He was "his own master"; at least, he thought he was, and he worked hard, but more joyously than at La Vigie. The worst part of this trade of working out by the day or by the week was not the per-

petual change of work and of place—Gilbert liked the chance of comparing in this way the different people and the different parts of the country—but it was the slack seasons and very soon it was also the low wages that were paid. From the 15th of November to the middle of March, good workman as he was, there were easily fifty days when he could only get work in the woods. In April, people on the farms hired him to help in the Spring work, and in the breaking up of the clods, but it was a bad month. In May he returned to the forest with his wife, whenever she was willing to follow him, for the cutting and the barking of the young oak trees; then came the busy weeks of the harvest—hay-making in June, wheat and oats in July; then a lull bringing days of enforced rest; and by looking around and offering himself here and there to dig potatoes and for the Autumn sowings, he managed to get through to All Saints' Day, the season when he buried himself again with his comrades in the forest. A hard season, but one in which he lived with many companions, and which he loved.

He often had to go three or four miles in the morning and again in the evening, to reach the wood yard and to return from it. When her father returned home, always after dark—for the work was finished about five o'clock, a little before sunset—the child would say:

"You love the woods too much, papa!"

He would lift her up at arm's length and hold her turned toward the flame of the hearth so that he could see the joy of youth in the depths of the

child's almond-shaped eyes, so full of life and of the tone of the beech trees in autumn, and he would answer laughing:

"I work hard, my little Marie, so that neither of you need work!"

In the single room which filled the whole space between the four walls of the house—two beds in the back, a great chimney-place on the right wall, a large wardrobe opposite reaching up to the joists, a door and a window looking out upon the forest road, a few household utensils hung from nails, a wooden box in which the food was kept, a cask of wine wedged between two split logs—he never remained for long. His work took him far away, and so did that life among other men, which becomes a habit, a school, and in a short while a tyranny.

The men talked together on their way to work through the lines of trees and when returning in the evening with their staffs on their shoulders, and also when at mid-day all the wood-cutters of the clearing collected together in groups in the shelter of the corded firewood, and opened their lunch bags. Gilbert, who had the prestige of his size and the reputation of an independent character, was listened to with attention. They often took him for umpire in the disputes between the workmen and the sworn clerks who watched them in behalf of the wood merchants. He complained aloud—the others merely grumbled in undertones—that the pay was not enough. A franc and a half a day was too little, it was unjust. And this also gave him an ascendency over his comrades.

He did not earn any more than at Monsieur Fortier's, but the freedom of his life and the variety of the work took away any regret for the past from this tall wood-cutter, who felt that his youth gave him a sure future and who exercised a powerful influence over his equals.

The health of his wife, never good, grew rapidly worse. The poor woman, consumed by an insidious disease, grew as pale and thin as a wax taper. She lost her hair and her teeth, which had made her smile brilliant, and even her love for dress. Little Marie, on the contrary, prettier even than her mother had been, slender, blonde, fresh, with eyes that flashed readily with anger but were fascinating when her mood was gentle, grew up like an oak on the edge of the forest. Her father knew of nothing that was as beautiful. He who was so rough with men was weakness itself before her. He spoiled her, and he said to excuse himself:

"I am too much away to make her weep when I do see her. You, the mother, have plenty of time to make yourself loved! But I have only supper time."

When she was ten years old she was confirmed with the other children of her age. It was a great fête, and a great expense for the Cloquets. Gilbert wanted Marie to be the best-dressed child in the village, and his wife had the work done by the seamstresses of Corbigny.

The morning of the fête, at the first sound which rang out from the steeple of Fonteneilles over the forest, the four neighbours of the Cloquets, the Justamonds, Père Dixneuf, the Lappes, and the

Ravoux, with their wives and their children, went out on the road to look at Marie in her white dress. They all said, "Isn't she a dear," but only Mère Justamond embraced her with the emotion which the understanding of religion gives. She murmured something in the ear of the child, who replied with a discreet yes. Marie's whole attention was occupied with holding up her veil and her gown, and in walking very straight, so as not to put her white shoes in the ruts. Every ten steps her mother admonished her: "Don't get yourself dirty, Marie!" It had rained during the night and a few large, left-over drops fell on her veil and on her hair which had been so carefully waved. Marie walked in front between the cliff-like rows of trees and her father and mother followed, one on the right and the other on the left, in their Sunday clothes. Gilbert had even put on his top hat which he wore only on the most formal occasions. Any one would have thought that they were true Christians, who had seen them a little later in the church, silent, serious, even affected and looking often at the little one behind her taper, in the second place of the first row; but their emotion was entirely paternal, maternal, and human, like that felt by parents who are taking their daughter to her first ball. After the mass, and when the curé, who was a courteous and timid old man, conquered by inertia through his despair of conquering it, had returned to the parsonage, there in the sandy path, he found the Cloquet family who had come to pay their respects and to give him the cakes ordered from the local baker. The brioches

seemed so large to him that he rejoiced at first, regarding them as a proof of devotion. He thanked them.

"Monsieur le Curé," said Cloquet, caressing his blond beard, "we are doing this because you have never given us anything to complain of, and I wanted to show you we appreciate it. It is not my custom to be indebted to any one who is our friend."

"I am not as much your friend as I would wish, Gilbert Cloquet, but your intentions are good, all the same. Thank you!"

"Good-by, Monsieur le Curé."

"Bring the child to vespers at half-past two, punctually." And that was all. The mother and daughter returned at half-past two. They were red in the face. They had eaten too much. Cloquet himself had begun to sharpen his scythe, for the hay-making season had come, and the evening before the guard from the château of Fonteneilles had engaged the reapers.

Two years later his wife died. His daughter was not yet twelve years old. This was a great grief to Cloquet and the cause of much anxiety. Poor and disorderly a housekeeper as his wife had been, she was better than her daughter. "My little girl is not old enough to do such hard work," she had always said, and the child had not learned even the little cooking and sewing that her mother could have taught her. After the mother's death, the father stayed at home with Marie for eight days, without doing anything, as the custom is, between the burial service and the mass

for the dead, and he tried to understand Marie, to advise her, to show her how to do some work. The girl was strong enough to do the house-work, if she had been willing to try. She was so tall and so entirely a woman in figure and manners that she looked fourteen, and some said even sixteen years old. He did not succeed at all. He was opposed by caresses, then by refusals, and finally, when he persisted, by a sulky and morose anger as unyielding as ingratitude. Near the end of the eighth day Cloquet, who was engaged in removing the knots of crêpe which he had fastened, in accordance with the custom, to the straw of his hives, saw approaching fat Mère Justamond, his neighbour.

"Père Cloquet," she said, "I already have five children to take care of, and your daughter shall make the sixth. Do not worry about her."

And Marie went on playing with the little Justamonds, and idling her time away until she should be old enough to be apprenticed. She wanted to be a seamstress so that she might leave the forest and see the world.

Gilbert was now worse taken care of, more isolated and more unhappy in his home even than before. He fell back entirely on his companions, many of them day-labourers the year round whom he met on the farms, and others who were wagoners, masons, small proprietors, pensioners, and mechanics, who worked as wood-cutters during the winter season or as strippers when the sap began to rise. The obscure feeling of sympathy which the practice of a trade develops, the need of being

with a number of people who agree together and who help each other, made him often hire himself out on distant farms, and return home late because he would go off for a drink among friends, and sometimes even sleep away from home. His clothes were in bad condition, his beard grew long and the dogs barked at him when he appeared again at the hamlet. The neighbours said: "Gilbert Cloquet is getting wild." But it was not that. He was really living more fully, with a more earnest, eager, generous, and restless life; he was living for others and with others of his trade, in the reviving union. His generous nature was filled with illusions, with blended angers and joys.

In 1891 and in the two following years, the woodcutters of Niēvre leagued themselves together to obtain an increase of their insufficient wages. In the woods, at the rest hour, in the drinking-places, and on Sundays, and in the farms where machines were replacing the rollers and the flails, the men gathered in large groups and the tillers of the soil discussed the affairs of their trade. Words that had not been heard for more than a century were spoken under the high forest trees or between the hedges. Some very old trees had shuddered once before at similar utterances. You could hear such sentences as: "The common interests of the workmen! No more isolation, individuals are weak! Let us combine to uphold our rights! Let us form a fund and each one sacrifice a part of his wages." Complaints were plentiful, and one stirred up another! "We can not live! The merchants exploit us! No more

famine wages! Is a salary of one franc twenty to one franc fifty enough? And how about our wives? And our children? And the days when there is no work?" Life, children, home, these great primitive words filled the hearts of the men, and after they had talked of poverty, they uttered threats and defiance against the speculators, those who were at Nevers, in the small villages, or in the country, in houses built from the wood of the felled forests. Other things were talked about also; the dreams in which they did not all believe equally, but which were nevertheless in every one's blood, for they were in the air they breathed, in the smell of the young buds and the new grass. "The future belongs to the people," they said. "Democracy is going to create a new world. The right to bread, the right to rest, the right to division." The whole forest was in a state of agitation that year. The underwood always being cut down murmured beneath the oaks: "We, too, have a right to the sea-breeze like the tall trees."

Gilbert Cloquet, with his passion for justice, was one of the first to demand a union. He spoke without skill, with controlled force, and, in the beginning, with a slight stammering which gave a quality of unexpectedness to his phrases. But he knew well the conditions throughout that region and he had the reputation of authority among his comrades. He traveled through the whole department to bring about an understanding with the neighbouring unions. He drew up the regulations. During months he lived, as he

said with pride, "for the cause of universal justice." The instructor of Fonteneilles declared repeatedly: "This Cloquet must have had ancestors among the Communists of the Nivernais." And he would have liked to talk about those peasant corporations preserved by the ancient common law, and which, in the sixteenth century, grouped the families of labourers and of wood-cutters together, working under one head, and inheriting among themselves.

Gilbert even had his moment of fame.

He was present at the reunion of the wood-cutters and workmen, convened by the prefect at Nevers, the 4th of February, 1893, where the wood-cutters' unions of Chantenay-Saint-Imbert, Saint-Pierre-le-Moutier, Neuville, Fleury, Decize, Sémelay, Saint-Benin-d'Azy, Fermeté, Molay, and others were represented. When the wood-cutters were asked to state their claims, several voices cried out: "Cloquet! Cloquet!" "Is Monsieur Cloquet here?" said the prefect. "Cloquet, day-labourer, present," replied Gilbert. And that was his first success. Then the tall wood-cutter standing, unembarrassed, supported by the living passion that was in all hearts and all eyes, went on:

"We want to live; it is not wealth we ask for; it is bread, and, if we give up butter, to have a bit of ribbon for our daughters. I have one myself who is growing up. We demand that the merchants accept the new tariff; that is one thing. And then that a cord of firewood should not be more than ninety inches high. If the merchants agree to that, we will all return to the

woods; if not, no. We must have justice which has been driven from the forest."

They applauded him for the power of his voice, for his energy, his size, and his fearlessness. It was a triumph. Chanting the Marseillaise, his comrades brought him back to his house at Pas-du-Loup where Marie, tall and beautiful, was standing, pale, on the threshold, to which she had run on hearing the singing. One of the wood-cutters who was a young man, went up to her and said:

"Père Cloquet has spoken well. Vive Marie Cloquet! Vive Père Cloquet!"

It was the second time that he had been called "Père Cloquet." He did not pay much attention, for the wine and the glory had excited him. He only said:

"Lureux, just because you are young, you need not make fun of me. I have done what I ought. I hope that we are going to succeed. Kiss me, Marie, and give a glass of wine to the friends."

And Marie kissed him, his Marie, with her eyes like those of a fawn, long, ardent and golden.

For a long time after the men had finished drinking and had disappeared down the forest paths, the father and daughter remained upon the threshold of the door, listening to the voices singing in chorus, and to cries growing fainter and fainter, of "Vive comrade Cloquet!"

The glory was brief. Even in the first strikes, Gilbert had to reprove the violence of some of the young men. One evening, after a discussion of the tariff with Monsieur Thomas, the wholesale wood-dealer, when several of the wood-cutters had pro-

posed that they go and sack the house of the "sweater," he had taken sides against them and made them give up their vengeance. At another time, when he had been called upon to join the members of the union, who had resolved to go into a wood yard and drive out the non-union men, he had refused to leave his house. "It is not right," he had said: "those who do not belong to the union have wives and children just as we have; let them come and do not force them to be idle. It is hard to be without work." A third time he had joined the procession of strikers to see what happened. And he had seen a clearing in the middle of the forest invaded by a howling mob, and six men of Fonteneilles, surrounded, beaten and forced to walk through the woods and along the roads, at the head of the strikers. They passed through the villages. They gathered up some cowards who joined with the band. The frightened prisoners, wounded by their sabots, begged to be spared. "March on!" And on they went crying for mercy, amidst the clamour of voices which drowned their complaints. Finally two of them fell in the road. Then there was a savage struggle in the twilight. One man, and one man alone, fought against ten. Cries were heard on the edge of the pond of Vaux, cries of death and of horror, so piercing that the people in the houses hidden under the trees heard them and closed their blinds. That night Cloquet came home very late with his clothes torn and his jaw bleeding. And when Marie, trembling, questioned her father, he said:

"Don't worry, the others are worse hurt than I am."

From that time on he had bitter enemies in the forest. Those who liked him defended him only indifferently when Supiat, one of the leaders, proposed to take away from him his office of president of the union of wood-cutters. In place of Gilbert, the founder of the union, the spokesman of the forest workmen and of the fields of Nièvre at the meeting at Nevers, they elected his neighbour, his opposite, Ravoux, a chief who was not so handsome but younger and more stubborn and who controlled the leaders because he spoke rarely and because his eyes never lost their fierceness. Gilbert still went to the reunions in the wine-shops of Fonteneilles or of the neighbouring villages; the men listened to him, but they voted against him. The young men said: "You better give up Gilbert; now that the machine is started, do not pull backward!" Many who dared no longer follow him respected him. And he, whose heart was all simple and fraternal, minded less being relegated to the second place than because he could not approve of the plans and words and deeds which offended his sense of justice. "So noble a cause," he said, "our bread, our defense; they do not love it as I do! Not as much, anyway!"

Months and years passed and Marie grew into a woman. She went out "by the day" in the village and on the farms. She was tall and was prettier than her mother had been, although she had not the same softness either of features

or of manners. Her clients found her brusque, changeable, sometimes "good at her work," sometimes indolent and so cross-grained that they could not get an answer from her.

Her father had the same opinion of her. He was afraid both of her and for her. When he was far off, reaping wheat or eating, in a corner of the hedge, the bread which he had brought from home, he would think: "What is she doing now? I only know about her what she is willing to tell me. Girls have secrets at her age. What a pity it is when they have no mothers!" But she was so affectionate with him, when he tried to scold her! Though she was attentive and anxious at first, she soon learned that she never would have any trouble in defending herself against vague gossip. She said: "The girls here are jealous of me just as formerly the young men were jealous of you." She made the soup carefully on these evenings, and she would bring out a bit of salt pork or a box of sardines which are luxuries to the peasants of Fonteneilles. Then, after the supper, she would sit down near her father before the fire or behind the house where there was an orchard no longer than a hay-rick, with three apple trees, some currant bushes, a very old rosemary bush, some beehives, and the forest rising all around. Marie caressed her father and made herself small beside him who was so tall. They seated themselves upon a thick oaken plank, which for twenty years had been rotting along the wall. Sometimes it was hard to make her father smile. But Marie nearly always succeeded. "Why did you lose the custom of the

Durgé sisters? It seems you refused to sew the bags because it was too hard work? Why did you leave me all alone on Sunday until five o'clock? Is it true that you allow this Lureux to pay attention to you? He is not industrious, Marie, nor a reliable man, either." She laughed so merrily that the neighbours envied Gilbert Cloquet his happy half-hour. But he did not altogether believe what she said; he let himself be just enough deceived to make himself stop complaining and talking of the past. "Well, Marie, you must do me credit, you must act honestly and discreetly. Your teacher has told you that many times, has she not? She was right. And besides, it would hurt me so if you had a bad reputation through the country!" But he felt that his advice carried no weight. He shrugged his shoulders and said: "Bring me my pipe; it always listens to me when I talk." The thin blue smoke curled upward. Marie got up to go and lock the chicken-house. And the stars moved on over a house restored to silence, but not to peace.

One evening, at the time of the potato-harvest in September, 1898, after taking supper with the master of the farm that stands on the hill side facing the great dam, weary with the day's work, Gilbert had thrown himself down on a bed that had not been used for a long time, and whose posts were rotting away in the midst of piles of sacks, heaps of potatoes, bands of straw, and piles of old harness which covered nearly the whole floor of the lumber room. The smell of the earth, that

smell of the earth which rises from the open fallow lands, came from the balls of earth still hanging on the roots and the blades of the tools, and mingled with that of old, waxed, and mouldy leather. Gilbert Cloquet was thinking, reminded doubtless by all this, of the work which he must shortly do in a valley where the plow would not meet with a stone and where the wheat sprouted readily. His mind was always occupied with his work or with the slack season that was approaching. Some one knocked at the door and entered.

"This is no time to disturb one," said Gilbert roughly. "What do you want?"

He was seated on his bed, his open shirt showing his hairy chest.

"Beg pardon," said a young man who entered briskly and remained standing at the foot of the bed; "I hurried, but I could not get here any earlier; I come from beyond Saint-Révérien and am on my way to sleep to-night at Vaucreuse, where I have been hired."

"That is a country which I know well," said Gilbert, "but that does not explain why you have come, Lureux."

"You won't return to Pas-du-Loup until the end of the week, Monsieur Cloquet, and your daughter Marie has charged me to speak to you on my way."

"My daughter?"

"Yes," said the youth, still in the shadow; "we have come to an understanding; she likes me, and I, I like her."

For some minutes Gilbert made no answer.

Many things came to his mind which he had heard said against this youth. He longed to get up, just as he was, in his shirt, and to drive him out, crying to him: "Begone, and seek elsewhere than at my house!"

But the vision of Marie arose before him, Marie, displeased, offended, and forever set at variance with him; he dreaded that final loneliness; then fixing his eyes upon this man who leaned forward a little, attentively, and whose eyes, even in the obscurity of the lumber-room, shone with youthful impatience, he felt a certain pity for one who, like himself, earned his bread in the forests, the fields and amongst the wheat with difficulty, like the birds, and who, like them, had to change his granary with the seasons.

"I would not have chosen you, Lureux, because people call you a spendthrift."

"Monsieur Cloquet, I do not drink."

"You do not drink, perhaps, but you are inclined to be extravagant; you pay for others to drink and you gamble. You will have to reform. Listen: if, as you say, Marie is willing, I shall find out and I will not oppose her. Send word to her by one of your relatives that, not later than Thursday, after the potatoes are dug, I will come and talk with her."

He had dreamed sometimes that his future son-in-law, the man through whom his race would be renewed, would throw himself on his neck and press him in his arms; and, at that moment, he felt in his heart the sharp sting of disappointment. No, that could never be; later, perhaps, friendship

might come. He held out his hand to the man, who had walked around the bed and approached him.

"For the time being, my boy," said he, "do not go too fast in your friendship with Marie, and do not enter my house before I return there, because, in that case, and you know me, what would follow would not be a marriage, but a shot at the corner of the road."

A suppressed laugh answered him.

"I will do as I say, Lureux!"

"Why, what are you thinking of, Monsieur Cloquet? Well, then, thanks. I have a long way to go to-night; I must be off."

"You promise not to stop at Pas-du-Loup?"

"Yes."

The door closed, but Gilbert did not sleep. He had used too great self-control in order to save Marie from tears; and it was he who wept.

He reflected that he had always been alone, that no one in the world except his old mother, and Adèle to a certain extent, both of whom were now dead, had ever loved him, poor tiller of the soil and harvester of grain that he was! He thought: "What have I got to live for now? For whom shall I work? For myself all alone? Oh, no! That is not worth while!"

For Gilbert Cloquet the world had ended when his comrades threw him over.

That same night, with his heart beating high with pride, life, and love, Étienne Lureux took the cross-road, descended the hill, crossed over the embankment between the ponds glistening under

the moonbeams, and entered the forest so as to reach Pas-du-Loup more quickly. He ran over the ground thick with grass and laughed. He looked up over the thickets at the clouds sailing past the moon and filling themselves with light. Then, stopping to take breath in the deep solitude, he cried aloud twice: "Vive Marie Cloquet! Vive the most beautiful girl of Fonteneilles, Corbigny, Saint-Saulge, and the whole world!"

Finally, his feet white with dust and dirt, he reached the hamlet. The five houses, hemmed in by the woods on the edge of the forest road, were sleeping. He approached a window and called softly: "Marie?" He did not wish Ravoux in the house opposite to catch him. He grew pale and the anguish of his thought carved another face there. "Where can she be? Dead? Disappeared? Marie?" Then, all at once, youth reappeared and happiness relaxed his features; the outside shutter opened and the head of Marie, her hair unbound and her eyes closed by the semi-darkness of the night, reached down for the man's kiss.

"Marie, I have just come from the farm of Vaux!"

"Did you see him?"

"He did not dare to say no."

"Ah! What luck, my little Lureux!"

Then she asked, smiling drowsily:

"Did he promise the *dot?*"

"I did not think of it."

"You are stupid, my poor boy; he has one!"

He chatted for a minute or two, and then, as he

had promised not to stop and did not wish to be too false to his promise, he again passionately embraced the young girl, picked up the game pouch which he had laid on the ground and with a bound, leaped to the middle of the forest path and disappeared. Marie, her head between the open shutters, her eyes large, her lips smiling and her heart full of pride, looked after the man who would take her away from her life of dependence and from the gloom of those very trees among which he was disappearing.

Shortly afterward, Étienne Lureux married Marie Cloquet. The father, seeing that his daughter was in love with this handsome man, could refuse her nothing. He yielded to that kind of intoxication into which mothers are often thrown by their children's happiness; he believed all that she said; he wished everything which she asked for. So that she might he happy as he had never been, he loaned her all his money, four thousand francs, which he had saved and invested by dint of self-denial all his life. The father's dream was realized by the daughter. Marie leased a small farm of twelve acres, called Épine, quite near the forest and almost entirely surrounded by the estate of Fonteneilles, and which, sold on the death of a peasant proprietor of Crux-la-Ville to satisfy a claim, had been quite recently bought by the principal mortgagee, a merchant of Avallon. She had one servant who did all the heavy work, new furniture, cows, sheep, two mares, heavy ornaments of little value, and the right to look down on her old companions, the seamstresses who

worked out by the day. It is true that when she leased the farm she owed a considerable sum of money, without counting the loan from her father. But Lureux swore that in less than five years he would undertake to be free from debt. In vain Mère Justamond, a matron who spoke plainly, had said to her neighbour, the evening before the signing of the deed: "Excuse me if I seem to be meddling in your affairs, Gilbert Cloquet, but you ought not to give everything to your children. They take whatever is given them as if it were their due. They promise gratitude, but that is a seed which seldom sprouts." He had answered: "Mère Justamond, I have worked for my wife, and she is dead. I have worked for my comrades, and they begin to desert me. I am trying now to gain the friendship of my daughter and my son-in-law; you must let me act."

Since that day more than seven years had passed, and many changes had taken place in Gilbert's surroundings.

Nièvre, at least the valley of Corbigny, Saint-Saulge, and Saint-Bernin-d'Azy had become a great cattle-raising country. White oxen, white cows, and black draught-horses wandered in the pasture-lands in herds twice as numerous as before. And to nourish them the pastures had been multiplied. The grass had crept from the hollows of the valleys up on the slopes of the hill. It was taking the place of wheat and rye, and eating into the country that had always been kept for the hemp-fields. The beautiful knoll of La Vigie, which used to be plowed every year, was now

smooth and green as an emerald clear to the top, and more than half the land which covered its slopes was clad with the same grass, continually getting higher up and only resowed after a very long time. This whole Nivernais clump resembled a park. The less cultivated country grew more silent. Something primitive and peaceful came back there with the shadow of the woods moving over the meadows. One could see at the fairs of Corbigny or of Saint-Saulge more than two thousand head of cattle. Cattle-dealers flocked there from all over France and from abroad. The farmers became rich. But the day-labourers complained, for there was less soil to work, fewer harvests to cut. Machinery also stole hundreds of days' work from them. For a long time past no one had threshed with the roll, and the flails astride the joists no longer moved except when the wind blew through the tiles. The drill plow, the mower, the reaper, and the binder now did the work formerly done by men.

The forest even no longer gave the sure work which had been found there before. After years of efforts, failures, new attempts, legitimate strikes, and unjust outrages the wood-cutters had obtained a perceptible increase in their wages. The day's work was well paid. But people who came from all parts of the country, from Morvan and Cher, from Allier or parts of Nièvre far distant from Fonteneilles and often men who did not belong to the trade, enrolled themselves in the union and claimed the right to work. No one asked them: "What brings you?" It was sup-

posed, naturally, that it was hunger. No one said to them: "Have you handled axes or saws before?" They just let them enter and they crowded the cuttings. They considered that, according to the old custom, "every cutting hired is free for all," as soon as a wood merchant declared it open. The number of the workmen lessened in this way the gain of each individual, and the profit of the year did not mount up as the day-labourers of Fonteneilles had hoped.

Gilbert suffered greatly from this uncertainty about the future. He was fifty-two years old. The habit of work, the air of the fields, and his simple food had kept him in good health. His strength and the accuracy of his stroke with the axe were the same as of old. He dug like a young man. He still had the elastic step which men have who are physically sound, whose muscles extend and relax in unison, with no one lagging behind the other. His beard was still blond, only one who was very near could see the few white hairs in the fox-fur on his chin. When, on Sunday, well groomed and having had his glass of wine, he went down the road leading from the town to Pas-du-Loup, more than one of his comrades and even the girls of Fonteneilles often mistook him and asked:

"Who is the young fellow who is coming back so early?"

When he laughed his eyes grew bright like those of a child who believes in joy.

But he rarely laughed on account of the slack seasons and on account of the comrades who had deserted him, although they respected him, and

on account of Marie, who was not making a success of the farm of Épine. Lureux's promises had proved to be vain boasts. He worked without enthusiasm or steadiness and spent much, although they had no children. There was always a free meal at his house. The road was quite nearby and much travelled and people stopped at the Lureux's to gossip a little and to drink. And the wine which the master of Épine imported from the South, by the boatmen of the canal, never had time to age. "Youth must pass," people said. "It has passed," replied Gilbert. From time to time he heard people say that debts were accumulating, not with the tradespeople of the town whom they succeeded in paying, but with the notary where they owed three instalments of rent and with the money-lenders of Corbigny and Nevers. For a long time Marie denied these debts. Finally she owned up to them and came to her father for money nearly every week. He gave the money and he hardly dared to reproach his daughter for at the slightest word she threatened to break with him. The next day she would go, dressed in her Sunday clothes, to a fair or to market or to a wedding leaving her house in the care of the servant or of any shepherd who happened to be passing. Several times Gilbert offered to take care of the animals and to manage the farm for Marie. But they did not want him to see at too close range the disorder of their household. So he only went to Épine when they invited him and the invitations were rare.

And that is what kept Gilbert Cloquet from

sleeping on that March night when Michel de Meximieu was also meditating, his elbows on the window sill. The wood-cutter was thinking of things long past, but he told himself also that since he had received twenty francs in advance for his work of the next few days, he would go early in the morning, and give half of it to Marie, who would be pleased.

And who knows what might happen?

III.

THE READING IN THE FOREST.

Gilbert Cloquet did not have to go far to see his daughter; a foot-path led through the trees to the corner of the pond of Vaux, which lies quite near the hamlet of Pas-du-Loup. It wound around the bank among the marshy meadows and disappeared on the way up in the middle of the first field. These fields, upon the "broadside" of the forest, as Gilbert called it, these twelve acres divided into about fifteen parts, with the house in the middle, and forming the extreme limit of the township, made up the estate of Épine, which, thanks to Gilbert's generosity, the Lureux had leased.

It was very early; the silence was so profound that the noise of the water rippling over a stone in the ditches could be heard. Gilbert carried his axe on his shoulder, holding the handle first with his left hand and then with his right on account of the cold. He stopped to count the white cows in the meadow which began on the outskirts of the forest and which was crossed by a trench; he cast a glance at the furrows in the field above, plowed land where grain was growing, to judge of the work of the plowman and of the sower. When he entered the court he found Marie, who had

just drawn a bucket of water, in a short skirt and with her hair uncombed and only twisted up at the back. When she saw her father she put the bucket down on the manure pile at the side of the well, and came toward him in a pleased and affectionate way.

"Why, is it you, father?"

He looked at her as she came toward him carelessly and offering her lips for a kiss. She still kept her youthful, shining eyes—so hard when she was not smiling—but her cheeks were paler than they had been and her features had coarsened. Gilbert allowed himself to be kissed.

"So, all goes well?" asked Marie. "Where are you going with your axe now? Lureux told me he would not be through till this evening."

"I have left my cutting because I had finished it," replied her father dryly. "And now I have some other work to do and am on my way to it."

"You are all the luckier to have work. Everybody can't get it," said Marie piqued.

"Ah! Marie, how can you keep on complaining? If I had a fine farm like yours, I would never have left it, in the first place. I would have dug it up and manured it and weeded it. Why does your husband work in the forest? Is that any place for a farmer?"

"Three or four days here and there; is there any harm in that?"

"It would be better if he worked at home."

"It is because we owe some money, father! We cannot pay the rent!"

"Ah, indeed! The rent has not been paid? Nor the wine merchant, neither?"

"No."

"And the cartwright, who sold you your yellow spring cart?"

"No, nor he, either, nor many others, too! It is not worth while keeping it from you now."

"Lureux lied, then, when he told me that you owed scarcely anything and that if I helped him, he would be able to pay it all?"

She turned away her head as if she heard a noise in the house, but really to avoid answering.

Gilbert put down his axe which stood up by itself, with the handle in the air.

"It is ruin, then, which is coming, Marie? Both to you two and to me?"

"Perhaps so, father, unless you are more liberal than you have been!"

The big wood-cutter made a forward movement with his head lowered, as if he meant to throw himself upon her.

"Ah! Heartless that you are!" he cried.

The woman started back, her body stiffened, and her face so hard that its beauty was entirely gone.

"Heartless girl! This is your thanks! I have given you the whole work of my life and the torment of my soul. And it is never enough! Now work yourselves, you lazy pair! Struggle for yourselves!"

"Did mother trouble herself about anything? Tell me that? Did she work? Not as much as I do!"

"Any way, she combed her hair before she did her housework."

"Thanks, papa!"

"She would never have put a pail of water down on the manure pile. She was careful; she had some pride."

"Thanks again!"

"And on Sunday she did not pretend she was a lady with laces and city gowns!"

"Aren't we as good as the ladies? Why not, indeed?"

"You're not as rich, anyway! And all this time you have only eight cows, and lean ones too!"

"They have enough to eat, though."

"You should have a dozen."

"We have sheep, father."

"Yes, and where are your lambs? You asked me for money to buy some; where are they?'

The daughter came up to her father whose anger was growing and tried to appease him. But she put little heart in it, and she only succeeded in lying a little with her eyes.

"We are unhappy, I tell you; every one is after us. The bailiff threatens to come."

"The bailiff!"

The woman began to weep. Gilbert took from his pocket two five-franc pieces and, with a rough gesture, placed them in his daughter's hand.

"I am very poor at present, Marie, but I do not want to see the bailiff at your house! Tell Lureux that I am giving you my pay for work which I have not yet done."

The woman looked at the two silver pieces and slipped them into her pocket.

"Tell him that there are not enough cattle in his pastures."

"That's easily said!"

"Not manure enough on his land!"

"No one asked you to go and look!"

"And no child in his house."

This time, the woman all red and her lips quivering with anger, replied:

"No child! That is our affair! And you, my father, why did you only have one?"

The father did not reply. The daughter had an obscure sense of the sacrilege she had committed. She blushed. They looked at each other, embarrassed by the reproach and by the avowal which their silence prolonged. Then Marie turned to pick up her pail of water and carry it to the house. Her father let her go.

When she reached the threshold:

"Marie Lureux," Gilbert cried, "you are a girl who is going to her ruin; I have loved you only too well, and that has been your undoing; I gave you too much and you have become the lazy creature you are. Hereafter you will get nothing more from me. All is over between us! Tell Lureux so that he may not come again!"

She called, turning half around:

"You will not see him again! Indeed, no! No matter what happens!"

The wood-cutter picked up his axe and started toward the corner of the stables so as to go round

the house and back to the road. He turned over in his mind confusedly, as a child shells chestnuts, the good and bad words he had spoken, and he murmured, shaken by anger:

"When I think that this was my little Marie, the child I dandled on my knees!"

Before reaching the road by which he must go down to the forest, there was a point from whence one could see, well above the village and a little to the left, the hill of La Vigie, the roofs of the vast farm placed on the rising ground and the round ash tree which commanded its entrance. Gilbert stopped. As usual, he imagined himself in that court where he had so often unyoked his oxen; then he looked at the fields, sloping down from there all green and fresh with the morning. Gilbert Cloquet could never look at this most beautiful hill of the region without thinking how he had climbed to La Vigie at the age when small lads, their short breeches suspended from their shoulders by wide braces, begin to feel the desire to make large animals afraid and to strike them with branches of leaves, and how he had not left it till after his marriage because his wife wanted him to.

"It has always been women who have thrown me from one trouble into another," he murmured. "I had trouble up there and that is the truth. And ever since then! And now, too! Come, go to the woods, my poor Cloquet! Go hide yourself, you father of a bankrupt! Fifteen days of cutting wood, it is worth doing."

He stopped looking up, crossed over the road,

and went on through the avenue of the château to the forest.

It was past noon. The wood-cutters were eating their lunch in the large cutting of Fonteneilles, near the pond of Vaux, and far from the place where Gilbert was working. Those whose cuttings were near and who gathered together to eat and chat and take a few moments nap, formed groups here and there in the cleared glade. Seated upon their heels, leaning against handfuls of cut twigs which bent like springs, or lying on their sides, they ate crusts of bread taken from their bags, taking care to add to each mouthful a small slice from the bit of cheese or bacon held under the left thumb. Each one had his quart of wine uncorked beside him and thrust down in the chips or leaves. It was warm in the sheltered places and cold in the wind. The men talked little, but they felt that they lived together and they laughed at the least thing. The fatigue disappeared from their tingling legs and arms. Their hats drawn down over their foreheads, protected them from the sun which was intense in the clear air.

Ravoux's group was nearest the pond at the left of the cutting.

The president of the union had already finished eating. Seated upon a trunk of witch-elm, he had drawn a paper from his pocket and was reading in an undertone, with nervous grimaces which stirred his black beard and stretched the dry skin of his cheek bones. Eight workmen had gathered around

him. They had hardly exchanged thirty words since the beginning of the meal. One of the workmen had merely said: "The work will be finished this evening. I do not know when I shall find any more;" and another: "Hear the blackbirds singing; that means the Spring." Some had closed their eyes and some had their mouths stupidly half-open. Their bodies sought the comfort of the sun. At Ravoux's right and a little in front was Fontroubade, the mason of Fonteneilles whom they nicknamed Goose-beak, because he had a long nose, a retreating chin, and always looked as if he were laughing, a sort of professional grimace made by his eyelids which were wrinkled by the glare from white walls; next came Dixneuf who leaned against him and supported him with his shoulder, a mason also, a former zouave, quite old, very deaf and proud of his goatee and of the reputation which he had of making better than any one else "*cambrouse,*" with the blood from the neck of the roe-deer; then Lamprière, a tall thin man, who always seemed to be in a passion and who frightened the "bourgeois" when he looked at them in passing on the highway; then Lureux, son-in-law of Cloquet, a farmer whom they were surprised to see there, a tippler whose mustache was colorless and softened by the fumes of alcohol, a joker, lazy and unreliable; then the tile-maker Tournabien, a quarrelsome young fellow with the face and litheness of a wild cat; then Le Dévoré, a farmer's lad, sluggish, red, and sad-looking; then Supiat, who called himself a joiner, but never did any joiner's work, a poacher of fish,

setter of snares in the woods, a speech-maker with the face of a fox and the eyes of a ferret, who denounced those who were lukewarm to the General Confederation of Labour; lastly, a tall youth of about twenty, a handsome smiling fellow, called Jean-Jean. He had come whistling down from the forests of Montreuillon, without saying why he came. And the warm sun inclined the men comfortably to repose, and no thought aroused them from their half sleep or excited them until Fontroubade, who did not know the difference between a manuscript and a printed paper, asked, pointing to Ravoux:

"What is our president brooding over, there? Is it a speech of the deputy?"

"Something better than that, and which carries farther," said Ravoux, lifting his shaggy beard and keen eyes, irritated now because his thought had been noticed before he was ready. "Let me finish. This is a secret document, an autograph letter, which I must read to all our friends."

"Holloa, Méchin!" cried a voice. "Holloa! friends! Ravoux is going to read, come along!"

The call flew through the immense glade, and far off, wood-cutters rose up, as if they had sprung from the roots of the oaks, and came in haste, dragging their feet and making furrows through the dead leaves. Ravoux was absorbed again in his manuscript but political passions had been roused.

"The deputy?" said big Le Dévoré. "He will come whenever we have orders to give him!"

"He will come right here into the cutting, and

we will make him sit down on a pointed stick if we feel like it!"

For the first time there was spirit, ring, and pride in their words. They uncrossed their legs. Two men lying down sat up and stretched their arms. Supiat, leaning his sandy laughing face forward said:

"Have you heard what happened to the deputy of —— last week?"

And he named another forest district of the centre of France.

"No, tell us, Supiat."

The blackbirds began to fly away from this corner of the forest where people were speaking so loud.

"Well, he came to visit his 'dear constituents'; people like ourselves; and he found them at table. 'How do you do, my friends?' They were eating herrings and the youngest of the band, Bellman, who has plenty of spirit, answered him: 'You call us your friends?' 'Most certainly I do.' 'Well, we're not, we are your masters, and you are our servant! We are eating herrings; you see them and you have got to eat some, too!'"

"What did he do? That must have been fun!"

"He ate them, my children! He would have eaten the very bones if they had not said: 'That will do!'"

"Deputies amount to nothing at all!" said Fontroubade with his thick voice.

"What is the matter with Ravoux? Why did you call us?" asked four young men belonging to the Union who came up arm in arm.

"He is going to read," said Jean-Jean.

"Is that all? Just something from the paper?"

"No," said Ravoux, lowering the paper, a double sheet, in folio form, covered with the regular round handwriting of the copyist. "No, it is an appeal which comes from Paris to the tillers of the soil! — After the factory workmen they are going to enroll the tillers of the soil, all of them, all!"

The men's faces grew grave. They formed a semicircle before Ravoux and they drew a few inches nearer, without rising, just dragging themselves along over the leaves. There was a rustling commotion of branches and twigs. And still the blackbird sang, but very far off. Ravoux opened his mouth like a bow. He enunciated clearly and rolled out the phrases, and he had white teeth with which he smiled at the fine points:

"To the tillers of the soil!

"Comrades, for years and years, for centuries and centuries, we have been ground down to the earth from morning till night, without reflecting on our lot, without looking around us, convinced that all we could do was to earn a morsel of bread with the greatest effort." The audience let this introduction pass without showing any emotion. They knew the beginning. They were already tired of it. Ravoux resumed:

"But it is never too late to do well! Let us ask this question, and reply to it honestly:

"Who produces the wheat, that is to say, the bread for everybody? The peasant!

"Who grows the oats, the barley, all the cereals? The peasant!

"Who raises the cattle for meat? The peasant!

"Who produces the wine and cider? The peasant!

"Who feeds the game? The peasant!"

—"There's something that is true! The game! yes, the game!"

—"Be silent, Lamprière. There is no more game, thanks to you and Supiat."

—"Let the president go on!"

"In a word, you produce everything! What does your farmer-general or your landowner produce? Nothing!"

—"That is true!"

—"He provides the ground, all the same!"

—"Who said that?"

—"Jean-Jean."

—"Keep still, Jean-Jean! You are too unimportant to speak!"

Supiat, giving a twist to his back, fell forward on his knees, then, stretching himself flat, leaning upon his hands, remained intent, like an animal, looking at Ravoux. He was like a fox who scented game. Every passion blazed in his half-closed eyes. Tournabien drew his knife back and forth over his bread, as if it was a stone he was sharpening it on. Lureux chuckled inwardly, his eyes fixed on the ground, thinking of his creditors from whom a revolution would help him to escape. An extraordinary silence came over the thirteen men. They thought they were listening, but really they were seeing visions. The same words grew for each one of them into different yet clear images. They saw beings of flesh and blood—the propri-

etor, the farmer-general, the overseer, the forester, the wood merchant, clerk, all their enemies. The grievance so often unexpressed finally took form. They rejoiced to have their own resentment clearly expressed. They recognized themselves in these ideas, written in Paris by a man unknown to them. And their confidence in their own strength, the more vague vision of the crowds, unions, revolutions, pillagings, justice, revenge, unheard-of intoxications, made them grimace or open their mouths as if to cry out: "I am part of it!" There were hardly two or three who understood the falseness of the appeal. All were strangers in the realm of words. They did not stop there; they went beyond it and judged the whole world. The anonymous declaration of their rights sufficed for the expression of their sufferings. There was no force within them to oppose this passion of envy. Their faces all expressed the same emotion. They were the faces of believers, of men inspired, or of wild animals on guard. The four men who had come from far still held each other arm in arm. And a golden light fell on their lifted heads.

"Comrades in the country. We are small because we bow down before the rich; let us hold up our heads, once for all, and we shall see that we are taller than they! Our comrades of the mines and of the shops have shown us the way; they are only waiting for our organization, which will be a great power, to march forward. Comrades of the country, let us consider this well: If tomorrow all the tillers of the soil should disap-

pear, what would be sure to happen? A general famine, frightful distress, and probably the death, in a few years, of a great majority of those who were left. And if, to-morrow, all the people of leisure should disappear, it is fair to suppose that no great harm would result, but that, on the contrary, humanity would heave an immense sigh of relief. And yet, we do not want to make any one disappear."

A few heads nodded approvingly.

"But we wish to see the day when every one in the world will be obliged to work in order to live, when there will be neither exploiters nor exploited. That day will surely come. That will be the commencement of our work. Comrades, let us go forward toward the great goal! Vive the emancipation of the workingman!"

Ravoux stopped speaking, but they listened still, thrilled, breathless, with dilated nostrils. Two or three, the poets, the musicians, the young, were dreaming of an idyllic future. Jean-Jean had risen to his feet and was gazing into the clear blue of the sky, with enchanted eyes; he loved a pretty girl of Corbigny and he saw her with him in Paris, in a carriage with two horses rolling along the avenues. The light glorified the rugged bark of the trees. The immense forest also was drinking in a new life. The men's thoughts were still on the misleading words. They had floated over them as the smoke of a train trails over the ploughed field. The smoke had cleared away; but something of it still remained by which the soil was invisibly penetrated and spoiled.

"It strikes home," said Lamprière.

"It's a masterpiece," replied Ravoux, folding up the paper. "There is a plan of organization!"

"Down with the proprietors! Who will set fire to the woods?" cried Tournabien, springing to his feet.

He felt in his pocket for his tinder-box.

"No foolishness!" cried Ravoux. "The forest is our living. These friends in Paris do not tell us to burn, they tell us to organize, to enroll all the day-labourers of Fonteneilles."

"There are some who do not pay their assessment!" cried Tournabien.

"There are some who do not want to join with us, the *canailles!*" cried Lamprière.

The cords of his throat remained tense and quivering with anger after he had spoken.

"There are traitors among us, Ravoux!"

"What are you saying? Who are you talking about?"

It was Supiat, who suggested that there were traitors. Ravoux rose and walked over to the carpenter wood-cutter, whom he detested.

"Are you speaking of me?"

A tumult interrupted him.

"No! No! Explain yourself, Supiat!"

Groups of men were watching in the distance. Supiat half closed his eyes; he was on all fours; he laughed wickedly and pushed back his hat, with the back of his hand, on his neck, and ground his teeth, as if he were going to bite Ravoux, who was bending over him.

"You never know what is going on," he said

laughing, "you are a poor president, Ravoux. Yes, there are traitors. There are those who hire themselves all alone, for a cutting, and who say nothing about it to their comrades, so as not to have to share with them." All the men who were still seated or lying down rose together. Supiat, who was half a head taller than Ravoux, stood up facing him, his look vibrant with the evil joy of his disclosure.

"Just look and see who is missing here?"

Ten men counted and named rapidly the woodcutters present. Two cried at the same time:

"Cloquet! It is Cloquet!"

"It is he!"

"Where is he?"

"Ask Lureux."

Four of the most excited surrounded Lureux, seized him by the shoulders and shook him. The son-in-law of Cloquet was frightened, but he tried to joke.

"Let me go! I have no wish to run away! I will tell you what you want to know. Why do you crowd around so! Let me go, I say! Well, now, I will tell you that as I came here this morning I saw my father-in-law going down into the cutting on the left of the château."

"Had he his axe?" demanded Ravoux.

"Why, yes, he had it!"

"He has hired himself all alone! The traitor!" cried Tournabien. "Let us go and take him away from his work! Halloa, comrades! Who is coming to take Cloquet away?"

Tournabien had shouted at the top of his lungs,

making a speaking trumpet of his two hands. Out from the shelter of the cords of firewood, or from behind piles of charcoal, men started up. Some only looked in the direction of the voice. Others came running toward them, leaping over fallen branches. The wood-cutters around Ravoux gesticulated and jostled each other, some wanting to go down to Fonteneilles, others not. The president, with his face pale with emotion over his black beard, tried to stop Tournabien, Supiat, and Lamprière, the three most violent. Clenched fists were raised against him, but that did not trouble him. With his two hairy hands he held the strongest of the fanatics by the arm and struggled with him.

"You must listen to me, Tournabien!"

"No, I am going! Down with the traitors!"

"Do not go, I say! Gilbert has the right to work!"

"Not all alone!"

"Yes, indeed, all alone, since he has been hired by the proprietor. That is recognized by everybody."

"I don't care! To the woods of Fonteneilles, comrades! To the hunt!"

Tournabien tore himself away. A band of wood-cutters, some with cudgels, others with axes, came running up. They did not stop to argue with Ravoux, nor to listen to the explanations of Tournabien. There was something to do and that "amused" them. They started. With one impulse they broke through the group around Ravoux, carrying along with them all the worst

ones and some of the moderates. Another little group, crossing the clearing obliquely, joined the crowd that came down. One of the wood-cutters who was at the head of the column drew a bugle from his bag and sounded a call. They began to run, and, like a band of wild boars, plunged into the underwood and disappeared. Ravoux, furious, hesitated whether to run after them or not. His lips trembled. He thought of the distance and heard the cries and the bugle call. He was afraid of entirely ruining his prestige, which was already lessened.

"What is the use?" he cried. "I can do nothing there!"

Picking up the sheet of manuscript which had fallen to the ground during the struggle, he resumed his place in the cutting he had opened in the wood. But after a few strokes of the axe he stopped and listened. The men who had remained near him, and especially Lureux, did the same. The wind was very light. The twenty wood-cutters who had dashed off on the hunt for Cloquet, took precautions, and sang less loudly as they drew near the preserves of the château, for the noise of their voices became like that of a band of singers, a little the worse for wine, who do not all finish the song they begin.

Gilbert had worked since morning. At half past eleven, he had gone home to warm his bowl of soup. Then he had returned to the cutting, a fine underwood, thick, full, overflowing, on the skirts of the forest. Joyous at feeling himself alone and master of a cutting for fifteen days, he

had thrown down, with great blows, pieces of beech, birch, aspen, and even oak, for there was to be no stripping of bark, Monsieur de Meximieu had said, as everything was to be burned, either in fagots or in firewood.

He had tossed his jacket upon the first fagots at the beginning of the long, bushy pile which represented the result of his half-day's work, and he was going straight on, lengthening the opening which he had made, not entirely upon the "broadside" of the forest, but in a line parallel to the meadows of Fonteneilles and some fifteen yards away.

He was in good condition, and felt that his muscles were supple. With one stroke he cut through twenty years of growth; he was so alive that he forgot the cares of life. Every now and then he straightened himself up, let his axe slip down by his foot, till the blade cut the earth, while the end of the handle, weighted by its thick band of iron, drove into the moss and held the foot upright. Then, raising his left arm, with the sleeve of his shirt he wiped the perspiration from his face and forehead, and took two or three long breaths, laughing out loud. During one of these pauses he saw, through the thicket, Tournabien and Lamprière and their companions, who were picking their way along in single file, at regular distances, like beaters in the chase. He understood at once what it meant, for he, too, had helped to take non-union workmen away from the forest cuttings. But now his case was different.

"What are you doing there?" demanded Tour-

nabien, stopping on the other side of the barricade formed by the felled wood.

"Why have you deserted your comrades?" said Lamprière, whose moustaches were the only pale spots on his face, reddened by the race and by anger.

He stopped a little to the left of Tournabien. Meanwhile the other wood-cutters went to the other side of the wood pile, completely surrounding Gilbert. But they kept at a distance. And it was Supiat who advanced straight in front of the wood-cutter and said:

"We have come to take you away; you understand? Throw down your axe and return to the wood yard. And then, to-morrow, we will all come back here with you to do the work."

"That remains to be seen," said Gilbert, slipping his hand a little lower down on the handle of his axe.

"Who has hired you all alone?"

"Meximieu. He has the right to do so. And I to accept."

"You know very well," said Supiat, "that when a cutting is engaged it is open to all. Any one may come who chooses."

"Yes, when a wood merchant buys it. But when the owner keeps it, he does what he chooses. That has always been so."

"Well, anyway! We are going to change all that, Gilbert! And you are going to trot out of this in front of us, until we all return here together."

"Tournabien is right," cried the others. "Down with the traitor!"

"I am in my right. Do not come any nearer!"

Some of the men came forward and there was a noise of rustling leaves and broken branches in the rear and on the side. Supiat had crouched close to the ground like the agile brute that he was; he threw himself forward, trying to seize the axe or the legs of Gilbert, who did not recoil but raised his heavy blade. A flash cut the air above him; cries rose on every side and stampings like the charging of horses; the axe, released voluntarily or not, in the middle of its course, flew above the back of Supiat and rebounded on the cut branches. In the midst of threatening fists and waving arms, Gilbert, his legs pulled forward by his adversaries, was thrown down backward, like a tree sawed close to the ground. Then ten men threw themselves upon the fallen man.

"Death to the traitor! Assassin! Take that! There, and that!"

They fought each other to strike Gilbert better. Growlings of rage and of pain rose from this crawling mass, hemmed in by the other men who, bending forward, ready to rush in, howling with rage, their fists clenched, eyes furious, waited like a pack of hounds who cannot reach the hunted creature fastened down by the bravest of the pack.

Then a voice cried:

"Stand off, cowards! Let him go!"

In a second the heap broke apart. The human ball unwound. A motionless body remained stretched on the ground.

"It wasn't me, Monsieur Michel! It wasn't me! He tried to kill me!"

Supiat advanced to meet the Comte de Meximieu.

The others had already reformed the circle, at a distance, and, recoiling slowly, enlarged it. Michel de Meximieu ran forward, pushing aside the branches. He was unarmed and dressed in his morning suit of blue serge. As he ran he counted and tried to recognize the wood-cutters who buried themselves in the background and disappeared behind the underbrush. The young man, pale, exhausted by his effort, slackened his pace as he crossed the cutting which had been barely opened, and, thrusting aside Supiat who continued to protest, he knelt down by Gilbert. The face of the wood-cutter was covered with blood, his eyes were open but fixed.

"Gilbert! Do you hear me?"

There was no reply. His waistcoat was in bits, his shirt torn, stained with mud and red in places.

Michel turned toward Supiat who stood at a distance, with a regretful expression. All the others had disappeared. The sun was playing with the shadows, and the wind.

"Help me, Supiat! We must carry him."

They lifted him, Michel by the shoulders and Supiat by the feet. His head hung down and a red stream flowed from his lips down upon his tawny, tangled beard.

It took half an hour to carry Gilbert to Pas-du-Loup, which was not really so far away. But he was heavy and the woods were dense.

It was an hour after nightfall; the physician,

summoned in haste from Corbigny, had just left the house of Pas-du-Loup. A careful and minute examination of the wounded man had revealed, besides very severe bruises over the whole body, a fractured rib. "Three weeks of rest," the doctor had said, "and you will be able to take up your axe again, my good fellow!" Gilbert had been unconscious nearly an hour, but now life had come back to his eyes. He spoke, he even tried to laugh, which is an expression of endurance among the poor. Only, it would have been hard to recognize the regular features of Gilbert Cloquet in the swollen and violet-coloured mass of flesh beneath the linen bandages which hid his forehead. In the light of the little lamp placed on the mantel-piece his blue eyes moved slowly between his eyelids, swollen by past weeping. They watched the door through which Michel de Meximieu, with the doctor, had withdrawn a moment before and which the wind shook, as if a hand tapped it at regular intervals, and they watched Mère Justamond, who had put on a coarse linen apron to care for her "patient," and having placed near the fire a row of pots of different sizes, in which some of the last Summer's herbs were brewing, had sunk down in a low chair, at the foot of the bed and was thinking, with her head resting on her hands; the eyes of the wounded man gazed also into the empty space between the floor and the beams, dreamy, clear, and sorrowful.

"Mère Justamond, has not Ravoux come home yet? It has been night now for at least an hour."

"I don't know."

"I would like to know. He is not usually late."

"The wicked rascal! After what he has done to you, why should you trouble yourself about him? He frightens me, with his white face and his black beard. However, I will go and see, if you want me to. It is not far from your house to his."

As she rose from her chair the door was unlatched by a nervous hand and Ravoux entered. He had just come from the forest and had only stopped to lay down his axe at the door of his house. He took off his cap when he saw his comrade stretched on the bed and came swiftly to the place which Mère Justamond had just left. His face, always nervous and feverish, contracted as he leaned forward, and his eyes met Gilbert's.

"Well, old man, have they hurt you?"

"Only the bark was touched," replied Gilbert, "the heart is sound."

"So much the better, old fellow! But all the same, they hit hard!"

The woman had retreated to the corner of the room, and she stayed there, motionless, as if afraid of being seen. The two men, accustomed to read each other's faces, did not speak for several minutes. Then the president of the "Union of the wood-cutters and allied industries of Fonteneilles" drew a little package, wrapped in a newspaper, from the pocket of his waistcoat. He placed it on the covering by Gilbert's knees, and unrolled it with care. When the paper was opened some pieces of silver and copper coin fell in a line on the bed.

"There! When the day's work was done a corner of the cutting was left which had been assigned to no one. So, in place of coming home at five o'clock, I set myself with three comrades to do your half-day's work. And that is about the price that you would have earned."

Gilbert accepted the money with a gesture.

"Was Supiat one of them?"

"No, but Lamprière and two others, who are friends of mine. Tell me, Cloquet, you are not going to lodge a complaint?"

To lodge a complaint? With all the expense and the uncertainty of witnesses besides the certainty of vengeance later? And to go back on all the efforts which the wood-cutter had made to combine the men who had to-day turned against him! And also, without Gilbert's being conscious of it, the habit of forgiving offences was in his blood, in that blood which was drying on his face and his chest. Not for one moment had he thought of lodging a complaint.

Slowly he turned his suffering head upon his pillow with a gesture: "You have nothing to fear. I shall not call on the judge."

Ravoux's face softened a little and into his look there came a kind of thanks and tenderness. He thanked him for the cause, for the party, though he said nothing, for his ordinary assurance had quite abandoned him. He well knew that the members of the Union were wrong in demanding the sharing of the cutting with Gilbert; that their claim was based only on force. He was ashamed and he remembered that it was the

reading of the appeal that had preceded and aroused the attack on Gilbert. But of that he did not want to speak.

Gilbert was suffering, and three times the pain checked the words on his lips. At last he spoke with the manner of one to whom misfortune and pardon give authority:

"You believe yourself to be their head, and you are not, Ravoux. You have not much authority. You have to let them do as they choose because they are the strongest."

"I know it."

"As for them, most of them have not, like you, their desires turned toward their work; they only wish for disorder and pillage; since I have known them, they have grown worse."

"Do not say that, Cloquet; our affairs are going well; we have made a great step in advance."

"Possibly, Ravoux, but their hearts grow worse. The feeling of Brotherhood has not come. I have waited for it."

Ravoux jumped at the theme which was offered to him. For a moment he forgot the wounded man. He began the stilted phrases of the reunions.

"You only see the imperfections of proletarian organization! That is so simple! So easily said! But we must make allowances for new movements, my friend! The future will teach the severity of law to these men, who now know nothing; the future will make them free, by making them intelligent."

Gilbert stopped him, raising his arm.

"Do not rant, Ravoux! You always talk of

the future when you are embarrassed. But I tell you that they will never learn much if they have not yet learned anything. Is it the school-teacher who will teach them justice? They have already passed through his hands. Will it be the priest? Every one knows that the day of the priest has gone by! Will it be the newspaper? They read it every day. Will it be you, perhaps? Come, now!"

Gilbert rose in bed in spite of his pain, and his voice grew feeble and whispering.

"I will tell you what worries me, Ravoux, what I think about our comrades. You can let me do that at least, since I am not going to lodge a complaint. Well! They have not enough to live on."

"That is true!"

"Nor you, either! Not enough to live on."

Ravoux believed that Gilbert was delirious and that he was talking of daily bread. But Gilbert was speaking of souls and spirits without the means of nourishment or the provision for life. They misunderstood each other.

The visitor took advantage of a moment when the wounded man closed his eyes to go out, making as little noise as possible with his heavy sabots. Mère Justamond rekindled the fire, cooked and sugared and filtered her teas, and with maternal kindliness gave the infallible remedy to her neighbour, exhausted and incapable of sleep.

Evening was slowly growing into the true night when men abandon the earth to darkness. Some children called and came to knock at the door. Mère Justamond could hear them, even when they

did nothing but think as they sat grouped around the fire, "Mother is not here! How long she stays at Cloquet's!"

When she was sure that she had done her whole duty as nurse, she watched for some moments the wounded man who was breathing with difficulty on account of his broken rib and the bandage on his chest. She thought that he was asleep because he had closed his eyes and she went out, after turning down the lamp.

Gilbert remained alone. He was not asleep. He was thinking of his wife who had only half trained their child; and of Marie, who had shown herself so ungrateful that very morning and whom he had forbidden them to send for, and of his comrades who had beaten him, their old leader, who had been their friend from the beginning, and he whispered low, between the coarse wrinkled sheets which were divided in great folds like cracks in the ice melting in a meadow.

"No! They have not enough to live on!"

A space of time which he could not measure passed. A soft, young voice came through the crack of the door. The forest was silent and the words sounded clearly. The passer-by had seen the light through the crannies of the shutter.

"Monsieur Cloquet, if you are not sleeping, how do you feel?"

"Badly, my boy. Who is it that asks? You can come in."

The voice still lower replied:

"No, I won't come in because of Ravoux. But I am on your side, Monsieur Cloquet."

The footsteps withdrew lightly and were lost in the night.

Gilbert thought that probably it was the son of Méhaut, the old tile-maker, a young man with a good heart, which showed in his face; unless it were Étienne Justamond, a fine, pleasant-spoken lad who always greeted him in the evening like a friend.

Or it might even have been Jean-Jean, the man who had come whistling down from the forest of Montreuillon. The wounded man could not be sure. But however small the consolation was, it soothed him. Gilbert soon slept and the night passed.

IV.

VAUCREUSE.

At the end of March the sun already has power when the fog is driven away. The mist had gone before mid-day. Two o'clock had just struck. Upon the road leading from Fonteneilles to Crux-la-Ville, which first goes up and then down, to mount again in a gentle slope the great curve of land crowned by the forest of Tronçay and that of Crux, the sorrel mare harnessed to the victoria of Michel de Meximieu trotted quickly, excited by the odour of the Spring. The sap was stirring in the still unopened buds of the beeches and oaks, and gave a purple glow to the thickets which stretch away on the left toward La Vigie, and which, like the ocean, have no limit but the horizon. The General and his son, seated side by side, their heads thrown back and bathed in the soft air of the first Spring, were silent, each dreaming his own dream, and following with his eyes the flocks of linnets rising from the edge of the road, or the busy magpies carrying in their beaks the framework of their nest. They were going to call on the Jacquemins at Vaucreuse. Soon the landscape changed, as they entered the valley of the Aron, with its vast meadows and poplar trees, solitude and richness on the two sides of a stream.

Down the valley could be seen the thick grass already ruffled by the wind, stretching back to the rocky land where the river started, and in front to where the blue haze, mingling together grass, river and trees, turns with them to rejoin the canal of Nivernais.

The carriage, having left the main road, followed a track parallel to the Aron and then went down a long avenue through the middle of the meadows. It stopped before a white château of the eighteenth century, not imposing like that of Fonteneilles. Vaucreuse had in front a large flight of steps shaped like a horseshoe, a raised ground floor, with one story above it and a frieze and roofs of slate pierced by only two dormer windows. On the right side a low pavilion, with a heavy mansard roof, recalled the old château which the new Vaucreuse had replaced in 1760.

It was to this family estate that Lieutenant Jacquemin had retired, when, in 1891, he had resigned from the army. He was thirty-two years old and he brought with him to Vaucreuse his wife and a little four-year-old daughter, Antoinette. Shortly after this, and when he had scarcely recovered from the terrible shock of his broken career, he lost his wife, who died from an attack of pneumonia in the midst of her youth and beauty. Nothing was left to him but the child. Fortunately the child was one of those beings who are natural comforters, who help the world to bear its suffering, who understand sorrow that they have not experienced, who always feel its presence, and though unable to remove it, command

and subdue it under their charm, like a wild beast whose cruelty has no longer power in their presence. Antoinette had saved her father from despair in his great trials. As she grew up, she had become the confidante, the friend, even the guide of this man who had preserved all the vigour and apparently all the energy of his earlier years, but whose mind wandered as soon as anything recalled to him the two joys he had lost: his young wife who had died or the army he had given up. Antoinette alone could touch these memories. She knew the way to do it. But no stranger must make any allusion to the sorrowful past. She guarded him from it, she was always there to make a sign: "Be quiet! Do not talk of these things!" She would turn the conversation or, rather, she would throw herself into it, guarding her father, keeping him out of the discussion with an anxious, distrustful and almost maternal tenderness.

The carriage stopped before the steps of the château of Vaucreuse. Monsieur de Meximieu and Michel were kept waiting a moment in the large round room, hung with rose-coloured cretonne, lighted by the three huge windows opening on the terrace.

"I am really agitated, if you will believe it, Michel, at the thought of seeing Jacquemin again! Fifteen years! It is fifteen years ago that he was under my command, in the 6th Cuirassiers, at Cambray. A man of iron will, with cursed ideas of preaching morality to the soldier, of apostleship, as he termed it, whose wings I had to clip,

but a good officer, severe for himself, kind to his men, firm on his horse, firm every way. He must have changed physically."

"I do not believe so. A trifle stouter, perhaps."

"Oh, yes, country life. Do you think that he still holds it against me for having interrupted his career? For, after all, it was I who, in the course of duty, in spite of myself did cause his resignation. He felt that he could not remain. I only asked him to yield."

The General walked about, looking at himself in the narrow mirrors which separated the panels of light cretonne.

The door in the rear opened. A tall, fair man entered, walking rapidly. He walked across the room and shook hands, bowing slightly.

"General, I am embarrassed. You see me in jacket and boots. I have just come in from an inspection of my meadows near the mouth."

"Yes, yes, 'the mouth,' the local term, I remember. How are you, Jacquemin! How are you! I am glad to see you again."

He held the hand of his officer turned landowner. He made him turn half round to get him in the full light. He was a little pale. He gazed, bending forward with his back to the windows, into the broad face of Monsieur Jacquemin, now flushed with emotion.

"It is indeed the same man! Short hair, black eyes without fear and without reproach, and hooked nose, and moustache cut short. Not many gray hairs; you have not changed, Jacquemin; a little extra flesh, perhaps, like your cattle

for market. Ah! Pardon, Mademoiselle, I did not see you." Monsieur de Meximieu dropped the hand of his host and greeted cordially Antoinette Jacquemin, who had followed her father and whom only Michel had noticed. The young people had already spoken to each other. The General's eye of command suddenly became the eye of the connoisseur, which, half closed, looked her all over, returning to the same points several times. An unspoiled youth, a proud and noble face, the hair of two shades of gold—that Michel had spoken of—a slender figure, and so much natural poise.

"I should not have been surprised I did not at once remember but Mademoiselle has just reminded me that your ancestors were among the models of Latour. You belong to a very old family; why the deuce did you drop the 'de,' Jacquemin?"

"My father did it, and I kept it up. He believed that the peasants here would like him better if he called himself just simply Monsieur Jacquemin."

"And did it help him any?"

"No. When he offered himself for election to the General Council, he was defeated as a "bourgeois," to cries of: 'Down with capitalism!' Instead of being defeated as a noble, to the cry of 'Down with the tithes!' That is all."

"You must resemble him?"

"Very much. But pray be seated, General. There, the large arm-chair? No? You prefer the straight chair? That is the habit of the saddle."

"Monsieur Jacquemin is mistaken," interrupted Michel. "His father left a widely known reputation as an agriculturist, in all Nièvre, and, whatever he may say, many true friendships among the people of the country. They knew him to be just and helpful, and they loved him. Elections prove nothing."

"Of course! Whatever disagrees with your humanitarian dreams can prove nothing. Just imagine, Jacquemin, my son defended, a fortnight ago, the strikers who were howling the *Internationale* before me—before me!"

"Excuse me, I was only explaining."

The General had turned toward the back of the room where Michel and Antoinette Jacquemin were sitting on a sofa. It was a young voice that answered him:

"General, do you want to know what I think of our wood-cutters?"

"What, Mademoiselle?"

"They seem to me to be orphans without either father or mother; no father to guide them."

"That does not concern us."

"And no mother to love them."

"You would take that place, perhaps?"

The proud little head bent forward, her eyes shone.

"Why, yes, I love them. I could go all alone to the very end of those woods yonder, beyond the river and the hill which you see through the window. There would not be a single man who would insult me, and I am sure there would be some to defend me."

"Ah, Mademoiselle, don't imagine that I am going to contradict you! To be pretty, and eighteen years old, those are strong reasons for optimism. I have never had the first, and I no longer have the second. You must forgive me. And you are satisfied with your establishment at Vaucreuse, Jacquemin?"

The "gentleman farmer" had crossed his legs and looked silently at his former superior officer. Painful memories came back to him. His expression, ordinarily firm and cold, became hard. The General saw it and put himself on his guard, his body erect, his head upright, his black moustache lifted by the half smile which Michel and Monsieur Jacquemin both knew.

"You are contented?"

"One is never entirely contented."

"I hear that you have transformed the valley although it was naturally very fertile."

"That is partly true."

"That the cattle of Vaucreuse takes prizes at Villette."

"In other places, too."

"And, finally, that you make large profits."

"I am not the only one who does that."

"I congratulate you. Fonteneilles does not do that yet."

"That will come, General. Your son is beginning very well. Time is necessary. You see, I have fifteen years of seniority."

The word was said with a bitterness which caused the Marquis de Meximieu to start in his seat. The old wound still bled and Jacquemin

was suffering. The General, leaning toward him, ready either to rise and to embrace him, or to become angry if he had cause, asked:

"What do you mean? Do you regret the regiment? Truly, what the army has become, ought to lessen any regrets. But, in any case, what have you to reproach me with? Could I have done anything else? Did I not do my duty?"

Before Monsieur Jacquemin had time to reply, a quick hand, from the depth of the drawing-room, made a gesture of denial.

"No, General! It was my father who did his."

Without even noticing the unusualness and almost the absurdity of discussing a military question with a young girl, General de Meximieu changed opponents. He was offended. He made a nervous movement of his fingers, well known to all the officers under his command.

"You speak like a child, Mademoiselle, and you do not know the facts. I will explain them to you. Your father was the ablest of my lieutenants in the 6th Cuirassiers, that is true; the most exact, that is also true; but he was also the most obstinate and the most clerical of all. He proclaimed before every one, even before the men, doctrines on which, for my part, I set the same value as on the ideas which are giving us trouble to-day."

"But they are just the opposite."

"That makes no difference to me. They were a creed. And I will have no creeds in the barracks; no ideas, that do not belong to our profession, and no preaching that is not about patriot-

ism. But he pretended that there ought never to be a review or a march on Sunday morning, so that the men should be free to go to church. He wanted to elevate their morals, to have instructive readings and lectures, in fact, to have the barracks a school!"

"But we have that now, have we not?"

"Not yet! And for my part, I do not command a school, I command soldiers. I do not ask them to be saints nor to be of my opinion, since I do not tell them what I think. I demand that they shall obey, march well, and never be afraid. The rest is not my affair. I belong to the old army myself, to the army which went to battle because it was their duty—which suffered hunger, thirst, heat, because it was their duty—their duty, do you understand? And that was enough. That is why, when Lieutenant Jacquemin, without my permission, gave a lecture to the cavalry men in the training school, I warned him. When he did it a second time outside the barracks, but after giving notice in the mess room, and in uniform, I placed him under arrest. He appealed. The Minister upheld me. I had the regret of seeing Jacquemin hand in his resignation and leave the army when he was only thirty-two, but for what I did I have never felt any regret."

"Well but, General, you must have regretted it once, at least."

"When?"

"A fortnight ago. When you were indignant at hearing the strikers sing the *Internationale*."

"*Parbleu!* Was it not an outrage?"

"Perhaps it would not have been sung if the lectures of Lieutenant Jacquemin had not been forbidden by Colonel de Meximieu."

"Antoinette! General, you will excuse."

"By you, who believe that you have no responsibility for this disturbance of the men's minds, who should cry *mea culpa*, because—although I am only a child, I must say it to you—because you and the others have discouraged officers like my father."

"Antoinette!"

Michel bent toward her and said very low:

"I beg of you, Mademoiselle!"

Mademoiselle Jacquemin stopped, trembling with indignation, her bosom still heaving with emotion. Her pretty face lost its anger very quickly. She turned a half smile to Michel, which expressed: "It is for your sake that I stop defending my father against yours." The General was no longer looking at her. He was looking at Jacquemin who lay sunk back in his arm-chair, his arms rigid, his eyes closed, like a man who suffers cruelly and who does not want to show it. Two tears ran down from his eyes. He felt them suddenly, hot on his cheeks, and raised his hand to his face. But this hand, all wet, General de Meximieu seized and the two men found themselves on their feet facing each other.

"Jacquemin, I have not ceased to regret you for a day, my friend; we have not the same idea about the army. I belong to another generation; but my esteem, you know, my affection, my admiration even, has not changed! Not in the least!"

They still looked at each other silently. Their hands fell apart.

"I should not have recalled that memory, had I been as clever a man as people pretend, for I have a service to ask of you, a great one."

"So much the better, General; if I can do it for you."

"You can."

"Then speak!"

Monsieur de Meximieu looked at Michel and Antoinette.

"Let us go outside, if you are willing; the children will follow us."

The gravel on the terrace, the long, sloping meadow, the blue thread of the Aron, the grassy hill which rose beyond, all vibrated with new life in the clear light. The General went out first. Half-way down the steps Antoinette joined him and, bending down, said very low:

"General, you will forgive me, won't you? I was hasty. I am always so moved by that story of his resignation, which we speak of every day."

"You are a thoroughbred; you come of soldier's blood; do not excuse yourself, it pleased me."

She smiled, glancing back over her shoulder so that those behind might see that all was over.

"And also, General, if I must tell you, I spoke because he cannot speak of that affair before any one but me; it hurts him. Come, father, I will leave you to talk with Monsieur de Meximieu. We shall take the path of the Garenne, shall we not?"

Along the raked gravel path, distinct as a furrow between meadows, the General and Monsieur Jacquemin took the lead, Monsieur de Meximieu on the right, making large gestures, questioning, bending forward, and sometimes, with a stroke of the cane, taking off the head of a tuft of dandelions growing on the edge of the path; Monsieur Jacquemin, shorter than he, stout, and sparing of his gestures! Only from time to time one saw his square head, with its soft hat, which nodded "yes" or "no."

Some fifty yards behind, Michel was questioning little Antoinette Jacquemin, whose youth, in the midst of the sunlight, the air, and the grass, was like a pastel set in a wide, light frame. She had neither parasol nor cloak. She smiled on all things because of the soul which love gives them. She pointed them out to Michel; the warren, the great clump of elms and oaks in front, the river, the pond, the long stretches of the farm, and Marmantray in the distance.

"You love this country as I do, do you not?"

"Deeply, Mademoiselle."

"I, I adore its meadows."

"And I its forests."

"I love its brightness."

"And I its solitude."

"Jeanne who laughs and Jean who weeps, then? Are you really Jean who weeps?"

"Often enough."

"Here, that is forbidden. I have not even permission to dream, as they say all young girls do. Much less would I be allowed to be melancholy,

even if I were tempted to be so. There is one person at Vaucreuse who has the right to be sad and he would feel it too much. It is my duty to be joy, distraction and forgetfulness. I am the present and the future in a continual fight against the past."

"That must be difficult."

She thought a minute and answered seriously:

"No; like everything one does from love, it is easy. You understand what I am trying to say? My father, if he were alone, would have gloomy thoughts. His regiment, his broken career, business cares, memories. I interrupted just now a conversation between your father and mine. I seemed to step out of my place. You thought so, did you not?"

"How do you know?"

"Well, in fact, I stayed in my place. My work is to watch over old memories. I prevent them from coming and, when I cannot keep them off, I discuss them and chase them away."

She sighed and she lifted her head, and the rays of light shimmered on her hair as over a field of waving oats.

"However, to tell you the truth, I need help sometimes. Do you know what we lack in our corner of Nièvre? Neighbours. There are a few châteaux, but the owners do not live in them. Two or three months is the longest time they stay. They have only the time in the country to love themselves, but to really care for it and to be loved by it, that is the true life. They never have it."

"You expressed that well!"

"Do you think so? I assure you that I have no trouble in finding the definition of this life which is ours and yours also. And those who do not live in this way are of no use to anybody or to anything. Why, think and tell me if you do not agree with me? I begin to think that my father is having a most important conversation with Monsieur de Meximieu; he has stopped to argue a point. I know it, because he is pulling his moustache. That is his way of saying: 'Therefore, Monsieur'; 'Consequently, Monsieur.'"

"They are starting on again."

"Yes, but here he is again turning aside and not to look at us; he is pointing to the forest, what one can see of it, just a few tops of some oak trees. I beg your pardon if I am indiscreet. I am only a girl, but I have already all the faults which I shall have when I am grown up: can you tell me what this great service is that Monsieur de Meximieu is asking of my father?"

"I do not know at all, Mademoiselle."

"He has said nothing to you!"

"Unfortunately, no."

"Usually, I am told everything. That is why it vexes me to-day that I do not know. Oh, my father will tell me the whole thing this evening. Yours will do the same to you, I am sure. There! They are taking the little footpath which turns to the warren. They are out of sight. But, now I think of it, Monsieur, I was complaining because we have no neighbours; you may solve that difficulty."

"And how?"

This time the young spontaneous laugh, quicker than thought, the laugh without a false note, rang out joyously.

"Why, marry! You will bring your wife to Vaucreuse. She will be my friend. We will be neighbours. Isn't that a way?"

Antoinette Jacquemin saw that Michel did not laugh, that he was silent and let his eyes wander over the distant view of Marmantray. Her trained sensitiveness, her life so close to suffering, had made her clairvoyant. She understood that she had not hurt him; but had only, without meaning to, passed near some sorrowful secret. Her whole heart was moved. She stopped as Monsieur de Meximieu and Monsieur Jacquemin had done just before, and almost in the same place.

"Look at me," she said.

He saw before him a child face already made maternal by compassion, lifted by the purest feeling of tenderness, eyes trained to read and to feel, and with a look which penetrated so deeply into his soul, that Michel felt himself understood. He who was so unexpansive and forced by his life to do without a confidante, was incapable of resisting this feeling or even of being silent about it. He said, still looking at Antoinette Jacquemin:

"It is true, I am very unhappy."

"Have you been so long?"

"Always."

She clasped her hands and with her delicate fair head made a motion of pity.

"And I who am so much loved here, have often complained!"

Her eyes turned away toward the farm.

"Then, what I said in jest, is truer than I thought. When you marry, so many things will be forgotten! Let me talk to you as I am in the habit of doing. It does not seem to me that you are naturally a sorrowful person; you are only a man who suffers. Trouble comes and goes. A wife could surely keep it away, since a child can succeed in doing so. I have known that since I have been old enough to understand at all."

Michel hesitated a moment. So much sincerity, such evident confidence, and a secret hope of comfort, led him on. It was the response of youth to the call of youth.

"I am not the kind of man who is apt to please," said Michel.

He blushed as he said it. Antoinette looked him up and down and back again, and answered with a very serious air:

"Why do you say that? Really, you judge yourself wrongly and you libel yourself. Most women are like me, I imagine, less susceptible to beauty of feature in a man than to the character beneath, and a face is never unattractive when one sees in it great energy and uprightness."

He held out his hand to her.

"Thanks; you have the gift of comforting, Mademoiselle, I see that. But what you tell me would have to be repeated to me many times before I could believe it. I have been too often told the contrary."

"If that is all that is needed, I will repeat it to you!"

"We only see each other every two or three months. You will have time to forget it!"

"I never forget. I will go as far as Fonteneilles to tell it to you if need be! I am very free at Vaucreuse."

She was laughing now. They had begun to walk on again, quickly, in the clear sunshine. At the end of the grove they met the General and Monsieur Jacquemin. The two men had come to some agreement. This showed plainly in both of them by their air of relaxation and that lassitude which follows an animated discussion.

But a shade of embarrassment survived the agreement. Antoinette, too young to notice everything, only saw, in the glad expression which lighted up her father's face, as he met her, a new sign of the paternal tenderness and pride which showed itself every day in a thousand ways. But Michel was disturbed when Monsieur Jacquemin took him by both hands and said to him in a brusque and emphatic tone:

"My dear neighbour, I beg your pardon for having neglected you a little to-day; you were gayer back there than you would have been between us two; but I want the chance to say to you that you have had an excellent, happy influence at Fonteneilles. You are a good man and a progressive one."

"I hope to continue so," said Michel.

Monsieur Jacquemin started and his expression showed surprise.

"Assuredly, my dear friend, you will remain what you are. I do not doubt it."

The four pedestrians followed the path around the warren, and returned to the château by a road which, going up the side of the hill, passed between the groups of oaks and went down again toward Vaucreuse. The conversation was about agriculture, cattle-raising, and hunting. Monsieur de Meximieu was absent-minded. He took leave of his host at the steps of the château. His gravity contrasted with his ordinary manner of taking leave, gay, and with a well-bred cordiality.

They returned in silence. The General found waiting at Fonteneilles the wood merchant to whom he had sold the year's cuttings. He settled his accounts with him, received the promised sum, remained for some time alone and, about five o'clock, rang for his valet.

"Go say to Monsieur le Comte that I am waiting for him in the smoking-room."

The smoking-room was a vast apartment hung with old green damask and, with the dining-room, occupied the southern end of the château. The windows opened, two upon the forest, two upon the avenue and the terraced fields looking toward the village. It was on this side, near the windows through which the last daylight filtered, that the General was seated before a table loaded with volumes and letters, when Michel came in.

"Sit down, my dear fellow; I have something to say to you. It is an important matter."

The young man seated himself, facing the light.

"Michel, I am selling Fonteneilles!"

"You are selling! Fonteneilles! You?"

"I told you to sit down and you are getting up.

Sit down again and listen. I am not offering it for sale; I am selling it! That is not the same thing. In fact, I have sold it. Do not interrupt me!"

"But how can I help interrupting you! It is infamous!"

Michel was pale and his two outstretched hands grasped the table.

"Infamous! What is to become of me?"

"Exactly true; that is the question. I expected it. We will come to that presently. But, listen to me. Listen to me, I say. And do not turn pale like that. Am I speaking to a man or to a child?"

A strong voice replied, and the very windows vibrated under the shock of the words.

"To a child, my father, who suffers, and who has already suffered much through you!"

Exhausted by the constraint which he had used to keep from crying out his grief, Michel threw himself back upon an arm-chair and dropped his head.

It was indeed the child who suffered, and the man who was silent.

Monsieur de Meximieu had taken from the pocket of his waistcoat a monocle without a cord, which he always used in a discussion when he had need of a diversion and of a moment of respite. The muscles of his left eyebrow knotted around the glass, the right eye remained wide open, and the figure of the old General was entirely changed. A restrained irony, the elegant and supercilious politeness of a diplomat, in whom there lived the experience of a race, sharpened and drew up the

wrinkles of his soldierly face. Beneath the man of command another man appeared who seldom had a rôle to play, but always played it well.

"My dear fellow," he said with deliberate slowness, "you condemn what was before your time. That is a mistake in life. The situation was made for me by long-past causes. My father left debts. The estate of Fonteneilles is mortgaged."

"I knew it."

"You knew it but you thought that the debts were mine. That is not so! They are inheritances. In the second place, there is your mother. She had no fortune."

"And you allude to that!"

"I remind you of it precisely because I cannot reproach her for her extravagance. I should feel like a blackguard if I did, or if I refused her the money which she asks. Now, she asks for a great deal. We lead a stupid and ineffectual life. The world holds us. I mean to say that it holds me through your mother. And it does not let go."

With his left hand the General touched a bundle of papers.

"Here are my accounts. They show that I am three-quarters ruined! Do not cry out! Do not throw up your arms! It is a fact and I have had my share in this result. I am going to tell you what that is. You would suppose a thousand things if I did not accuse myself."

"No; that is enough."

"You would think it was play! You would be wrong. I have paid, here and there, the debts of some lieutenant or non-commissioned officer, but

I do not gamble. Play does not count in my life. Women? Very little."

"I beg of you—! I do not ask you for confidences!"

"I offer them to you. Ah! My boy, we must understand each other fully once and I shall tell you everything. What has been my great personal expense? I can answer: The service of the king, or of the country, which is the same thing; the Colonel's table, the Colonel's hunts, the General's receptions; private help given to the households of poor officers, my profession, my career, my responsibilities. To be lavish in position is a tradition with the Meximieus. They ruin themselves by it."

"They die of it."

"No. There remains to me my pay and some income; just enough to live on."

"And for me, what remains for me? To ask for a position as underwriter? With your influence and my name, I shall, perhaps, succeed. 'Count Michel de Meximieu, assistant inspector of insurance.' That will sound well, will it not? I cannot help judging you, my father! To allow me to fit myself for a profession, to allow me to look upon Fonteneilles as my property and my life, and after five years of work to break it all suddenly is a wrong, and a cruel wrong."

"It is one for me in the first place. And then it is easy to say 'a wrong.' Misfortune would be a truer word. I do not find that my conscience accuses me."

"I do."

"Always the same! You add to the commandments of God, my dear fellow. Eight are enough."

"Ten, father."

"That may be. There is none that forbids me to sell my land. Besides, Jacquemin has promised me to keep it absolutely secret, even from his daughter; and we have agreed that I can take back my word at the end of the year while he remains pledged in any case, if I wish it. Who knows? Something may happen between now and the end of the year."

"Nothing will happen except more creditors. And I ask you again. In this ruin, what is to become of me? I am twenty-six years old. I am an agriculturist. What do you expect me to do?"

"Only one thing; to come and live with your mother and me."

"In Paris?"

"Certainly."

"To do nothing there? Thanks. I am accustomed to work. I do not accept. I cannot accept."

Monsieur de Meximieu had let his monocle drop. He was troubled, embarrassed, and secretly humiliated. With the tips of his fingers he rubbed off the moisture collected on the window panes, and looked out down the avenue, as if a carriage were coming. But the solitude was complete. The darkness had confused meadows, fields, boundaries, until there was left only two kingdoms over which she ruled with unequal power—the earth, entirely dominated, and the sky, where a

little light still fought for life. He said, without turning around, in a voice that showed his pride was weakening:

"What do you want? I have nothing better to offer you now. The hardest thing in ruin is to be obliged to confess it. I have done so twice to-day."

During several moments the Marquis de Meximieu and Michel remained silent. Both were thinking. Plans were made and rejected one after the other; a tumult of thoughts, reproaches, useless questions, hopeless complaints, continued within them the interrupted dispute. Tears which come after anger and after irony, began to swell up from the depths of these passionate hearts. But they must not even be suspected. The whole past forbade it. Michel's arm-chair moved in the darkness. The General thought that his son was going to renew the discussion. But that was not what happened. Michel had risen. In a calm voice, almost in his usual tone, he asked:

"Do you believe that my mother would be willing to live here? You have only two years before retirement. We could keep the château and a little land."

Monsieur de Meximieu replied in three words:

"My poor fellow!"

One of the two men left the smoking-room. No one stopped him. The other remained sitting before the desk, but he forgot, until the dinner hour, to ring for a lamp.

At seven o'clock the valet came to announce that dinner was served and that Monsieur le

Comte, who was not feeling well, would not come down.

The next day, early in the morning, the General left for Paris.

V.

THE PETITION FOR MERCY.

Michel wrote, that same night, a long letter to his mother, which began with cries of grief, but which, as the strong handwriting covered the sheets of paper, grew tender, supplicating, and even let a little hope shine through. He had re-read it, and had added this postscript: "Do not answer me, reflect upon all that I have just said; I will come in a few days to kiss you, to ask you for an answer and to thank you."

During the first week of April his hope continued to grow. It followed Michel through the fields, for he had to hurry from one end of the estate to the other. They were ploughing the fallow land; they were planting maize, clover, French grass; they were beginning to cut the first acres of green rye upon the heights along the road of Fonteneilles, and near the ponds of Vaux; they were rolling a new meadow, and everywhere, in the old pasture lands, it was necessary to see to the drainage ditches and canals, and the trenches, which the Spring had swollen with fresh water, and whose banks were already covering themselves, in the sun, with tufts of mint, pimpernel, and hemlock. The sap spread in the branches; the earth opened, the dogs barked at night at the

passage of the beasts roaming the woods. Grollier had put on a straw hat. Gilbert Cloquet, partly convalescent, had been seen in a hemp field beginning to enjoy his work again, and digging with one hand; the maids who watched the cows, when they answered a good-morning called across the paths, had stars in their eyes. Why should he not hope? "If I can persuade my mother, after she has said yes, to pass three days at Fonteneilles, she will be enchanted. She is artistic! And above all, she is kind; she will have pity on me, and on the estate, which has belonged to us for more than three centuries, and on the people of Fonteneilles, who are not perfect, but who would be worth even less if we were not there. I will give her more time, if she wants it, to leave Paris and to come and settle here: till the middle of Summer, or the middle of Autumn. She will come."

The 9th of April, which was Holy Monday, Michel started for Paris. In the rack of the railway carriage in front of him, he carried a valise, a hat box in which was the silk hat, never seen at Fonteneilles, and a large map, rolled and wrapped up, of the estate, "to talk over and explain things, if need be." He always looked forward for weeks in advance to these trips to Paris, made three or four times a year. But this time, mixed with the usual pleasure of renewing old acquaintances and meeting friends of childhood, and enjoying all the elegancies of life which he had always liked, there was mingled an emotion which kept him awake and excited through the whole journey.

At the Paris station he sprang into a cab, and said to the driver: "Drive fast, I am expected." He was not expected, because he had not written again; and he was not sure whether his mother would be in at half past three in the afternoon.

She was at home. He had scarcely entered the apartment of the avenue Kléber, when he heard a well-known voice, a gentle voice which said:

"Why, of course I'll see him! Is it really Michel?"

Three seconds later a door opened; Madame de Meximieu ran to meet the traveller, took his big head in both her hands and kissed him again and again.

"How do you do, my dearest. How glad I am to see you again! Since Christmas, just think of it! Your father has not come in. But he will be here at seven o'clock. We are dining out. How happy I am to have you here! Come to my room."

She took him by the hand and drew him into a room hung with cream-coloured stuff flowered *à la* Pompadour, and bright with all the light of the avenue.

"You are looking well. You are not tired with the journey? No. Then you can stay up this evening? Do you know what I will do? I will telephone the Virlets, that I am bringing you. They are intimate friends whom you do not know. They will be delighted. That is settled, is it not?"

He had seated himself by her side and he let her talk on for he found it pleasant to have some

one doing things for him. And it was a pleasure to see her so animated, gay, and young.

It was only after a half hour that he asked her, almost without trembling, as about a thing the time for speaking of which would naturally come in the first pause:

"And my great question, have you thought about it?"

Madame de Meximieu raised her hand and waved it as if to brush aside his words and scatter them.

"Do not let us talk about that now. Like all serious questions, it must be put off as long as possible. Yes, I have thought about it. Your father has repeated to me your—conversation together. Then, he has left me free to do whatever I like."

"So much the better!"

"Do not say 'so much the better,' my son. I do not know—it depends a little upon you."

"Upon me?"

She smiled a maternal smile.

"Yes, I will explain to you. I have perhaps found a way out. Do not ask me to talk about it now. I will give you an appointment. When must you go back?"

"Day after to-morrow."

"Very well! The day after to-morrow at three o'clock. Does that suit you?"

She kissed him again and they separated.

In the evening Michel dined with the Virlets; with his father, who showed no resentment for the violent scenes at Fonteneilles; with his mother,

who showed herself more tender and kind to her son than ever before. Tuesday he went about and made some calls. Wednesday morning he went to La Villette, and passed several hours watching the arrival of the cattle, and talking with cattle-dealers and merchants whom he knew would be there. He had to find out the condition of the market in France and in Belgium; to buy some animals; to renew some commercial relations which would be useful, if they kept Fonteneilles; he must keep up to date in his profession, and take care of the future, either for himself or for some one else. He lunched rather late at the restaurant Dagorno, rue d'Allemagne, where landowners, merchants from the valley of Auge and from several provinces of France met together. Then, as it was only two o'clock when he found himself in front of the Printemps shops, he resolved to walk the rest of the way home.

As soon as he was alone in the crowd and had begun to walk toward the Étoile quarter, the anxiety, which he had restrained with difficulty, seized him again. In a few moments his fate would be decided. All kinds of dark presentiments seized him and weighed him down. He could not explain why. He battled against them. He tried to recall his mother's words and looks, and to foresee what she had decided. Poor sport! Wilful delusion! He knew it well! All the same he repeated to himself, as the only argument to which there was no reply, "She is kind, fortunately, very kind."

Madame de Meximieu was not, in fact, without

kindness of heart. Her friends even said: "Marguerite has real feeling underneath." And they spoke of visits which she had made to them in times of trouble; they recalled things she had said, well fitted to encourage a sad heart, and they told a story about a cabman, a poor drunken devil, who had fallen from his seat in the street in winter, with a stroke of apoplexy, and whom Madame de Meximieu—who was in the cab—had helped to pick up, had had carried to the nearest drug store and had taken care of herself, "yes, my dear, herself, during an hour and a half! The druggist, whom she herself paid, declared that the cabman could not bear any more rubbing and blistering and that he must be taken to the hospital. Otherwise she would have kept on working over him, she told me." They could have proved in other ways the kindness of Madame de Meximieu. Unfortunately, she dispensed it outside of her family by fits and starts, like money, in the least judicious way. She lacked common-sense, the habit of using words to express a clear idea, of using her mind to think with, of using knowledge of the world for anything except to observe the weakness of her neighbours. Madame de Meximieu, at the age of forty-eight, paid the penalty of her early education, which had been what is called fashionable, that is to say, distinctly empty. She had never known what home meant; she had dissipated her life, her time, her reflections, her tastes and her money, without having anything to show for what she had given. In the beginning of her married life, if her husband had known how to

judge her less severely and to love her less lightly, and really to understand her better, he could have repaired the lack of training of his young wife. At present she was almost an old woman, in whom the faculty of understanding many things was already dead. Pleasure, diversions, and gossip had become the greatest influences and the important things in her life. She really suffered when she had to pass three weeks outside of Paris; she had no personal opinion upon any subject; she possessed merely, in her memory, a badly ticketed and incomplete collection of the opinions of other people, very varied in origin and nearly all anonymous, the memories of superficial reading or of conversations, fragments of confidences or of talks which had not taught her anything and had not even given her information, but which she used with such natural art that it was often said of her: "She is extremely intelligent." She was passably so. Prudent about history, discreet in the abstract, yawning over politics, she spoke with ease upon other topics. Her voice was musical and cultivated. She kept her mind warm and cradled it. Sometimes, and without desiring it, Madame de Meximieu had a glimpse of the poverty of her heart, her life, her past, and her future, and she was frightened. Suddenly, when she heard some tale of love or of death, she pitied herself. Floods of unreasoning tears sprang to her eyes and she felt that she might have shed them to better purpose. The woman she might have been appeared to her vaguely, but still enough to make her suffer. Her fear of solitude was the

result of these experiences. She was afraid of her approaching old age, when she would no longer be diverted or be able to "go out," when she would be face to face with herself and with death. She would have had the illusion of living and then all would be ended.

Michel did not know his mother well. He had woven a romance for himself about this life beside which he had grown up. He had filled up the empty places and explained its mystery with his childlike heart. From the words of passionate tenderness, furtive complaints and tears at his departure, he had created a mother, exquisite and delicate, obliged to live in Paris, but really suffering from the absence of her son. It would not have surprised him to have heard that Madame de Meximieu spent a great deal of money and time in works of charity; he understood that she was admired; he had always dreamed of bringing her back to Fonteneilles, later, when the château should be restored; he went even farther in his dream and he thought sometimes: "What a friend she would be, what a guide, and what a mother, if one day a young wife should come to live with us!" He saw them, the two dear women's figures, side by side in the avenue, at the hour when the declining day lends itself to confidences and softens the shadows under the deep green of the oak trees. His mother appeared to him more distinctly than the other figure. He thought her incomparably beautiful. For him she never grew old. In the depths of his eyes, the portrait of his mother was the one which he had seen all his childhood in the

little drawing-room of the avenue Kléber, the pastel of Dubufe, suspended from the end of a red cord, and which moved in the wind from the door. The Marquise de Meximieu still had small and regular features, and that complexion of a reddish blonde which prolongs for a while the twilight of youth. But her fiftieth year had come, and nothing can resist that. Age was written in her flesh which was changing under her still beautiful skin. On seeing his mother again, after months of separation, Michel had felt that impression, so familiar and so cruel: "She has aged!" Not sudden ruin, but the eyelids grown heavy, the fine wrinkles which were almost pretty, lengthening the eyes; a slight puffiness at the base of the cheeks, and certain livid reflections which shot at intervals beneath the admirable pearl of her shoulders and neck. At the end of three days he no longer noticed his mother's loss of beauty. He had a moment of surprise and delight when, on returning from La Villette, at three o'clock, at the exact hour of the rendezvous, he found Madame de Meximieu in the ante-chamber, in visiting dress, with a hat with aigrettes on her head, her veil knotted, her collar of sable half open and showing a collar of gold with a pendant of emeralds and pearls. She was only thirty again, the age of the portrait.

"You have just come in, mother?"

"No, dearest, I am going out, but I was waiting for you as we had arranged; I have still a moment. Come in the little drawing-room."

He followed, displeased, and seated himself near the white mantel-piece, turning his back to the

light. Madame de Meximieu seated herself on the opposite side. She smiled; you might have thought that it was at her gown of *crêpe de Chine,* which was quite new and hung admirably.

"Fancy, I had forgotten; yet the invitation was stuck in the corner of my mirror; I have a matinée at Madame de Gréchelles. The poor woman is so unhappy; she lost her only daughter three years ago, and she is so grateful when you go to see her! She consoles herself by having a little literature and music at home. Only, as it is Holy Week it will be for a very intimate circle. Why won't you come? Must you absolutely go this evening?"

"Absolutely. And I counted on our having time to talk; I hoped to pass the last hours with you."

"But I have explained to you, my dear child! It is impossible."

She stretched out her gloved hand and caressed the hand of her son.

"Do not be angry; tell me everything. I said a moment, but I can give you ten, though no more."

"It would take half a day!"

"And for what, *mon Dieu!*"

"To tell you all my life, which you do not know."

"That is a phrase which I have heard at the theatre, my dear."

"It is not from there that I have taken it though, believe me."

He made an effort to gather his thoughts and the wrinkle between his brows deepened.

"Very well; I will go straight to the end. My father, as you know, has told me that we were almost ruined."

"Did he accuse me of it?"

Michel made a vague gesture; she took it as a denial.

"So much the better, for the injustice would have been too glaring! Your father has never known the value of money. All his life he has spent more than he had. And you understand that it was not I who could reproach him with it! I am in a delicate position; he married me almost without *dot*, and the fortune which he has dissipated, as a matter of fact, he was the master of."

"Mother, I do not judge between you. I, on the contrary, ask that you judge me. If there be any one who has no responsibility—listen to me well and understand, please—for these excessive expenses, you will admit that it is I. Well! I am attached to Fonteneilles by every kind of tie; it is our ancestral property; I beg you to save it by coming back there."

"Forever?"

"Surely. My father has told me that we can only keep up one establishment."

"The country all the year round! Why, my dear boy——"

Madame de Meximieu had sunk back in her easy-chair, bewildered, hardly understanding how such a proposal could have been made to her. Her son waited, trembling, for a more definite answer. She recovered herself. With a

feminine gesture which caressed the material, she touched her corsage, the embroidery on her sleeve, her skirt of *crêpe de Chine*. Her head followed the gesture with a youthful movement.

"Tell me, Michel! Do I look like a shepherdess?"

"Oh, no!"

"Then you would not sentence me to live in the woods?"

"Is it really a penalty to live with me and my father, usefully and simply!"

"I would like that, my dear boy, I would ask nothing better than that!"

"Then do it!"

"But my health needs so much care."

Michel replied eagerly:

"But you only need rest and quiet, my mother!"

"Still, one must consider a rest that is practicable, my friend! What would we do, down there, without occupations, without society?"

"Without diversions? That's what you mean to say, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, if you like; I cannot get on without them."

"Without matinées of literature and music, without soirées, without plays, without gossip, and without an auto? What would we do if we could be of use to somebody! If we should economize, instead of ruining ourselves! If we could make ourselves loved! If we could think of others besides ourselves? In truth, the question is a bitter one and I understand it."

"You are hard, Michel, very hard—like your

father—you are like him; I would not have believed it. And you hurt me very much."

She wept. Tears gathered on her eyelids, and to prevent their dropping and wetting her veil, she sopped them up with little dashes, her face turned toward the dying fire. The tip of her boot tapped the andirons.

"Yes, you are hard. You think only of yourself."

"And you, my mother, whom do you think of? You do not see, then, that of us three I am the youngest, that mine is the only future to be thought of? I am not hard, in reminding you of that. You wish to bring me here, where I shall be an idler. You have allowed me to fit myself for a career, enter upon it, learn to love it, and now you break it up. Ah no! The most cruel one of us is you."

He rose and took a step toward her.

"You must understand that I have been unhappy all my life, mother!"

Madame de Meximieu raised her hands and sobbed.

"Ah, my dear! And I! I do not wish to complain. But I do not want you to feel that I have not thought of you. Do not look at me as you are doing, with such reproachful eyes. Listen. You will see."

She tried to smile.

"I have thought of a way—your father has told me of your visit to Vaucreuse. He has told me that Mademoiselle Antoinette Jacquemin was charming. Do you think so?"

"Yes."

"She is eighteen years old. She is rich, very rich. Well! Win her love. You will recover Fonteneilles."

Michel's broad shoulders shook with indignation. His voice rose and trembled.

"No! I beg of you! Not another word! That is not my way. Ah! What a memory I am carrying away! What a last disappointment! To think me capable!"

"But of what, Michel? Of what? What have I said wrong?"

"To offer my ruin as a *dot* to that child whose father has just bought my Fonteneilles! Yesterday I could have loved her. To-day, what kind of a man should I be!"

The door opened. Monsieur de Meximieu entered in full uniform. He came from without, his face whipped and roughened by the wind; he had just assisted, as a witness, at the marriage of one of his officers. He saw his son first, who came toward him.

"You are leaving?"

"This instant."

The expression of Michel's face, the knowledge that the blow had been delivered, the sobs of Madame de Meximieu, who had hidden her head in her furs, changed the General's tone immediately. The father was hurt by his son's grief; he said quietly:

"I warned you, my boy, that it was impossible. Fifty years of Paris, you can understand what a chain it is! For myself, perhaps, I would have been able to accept; I come of a country

race; but she cannot, you can see it. I never thought it possible."

"But I—I hoped. I have no longer the least illusion, believe me. But before leaving you, I would like to know if the means which has just been proposed to me of keeping Fonteneilles, was approved by you."

"What means?"

"Philippe, it is I who proposed it, I who thought of it. I assure you, Michel, that your father knew nothing about it."

"Well, father, I make you judge. My mother has thought if I could win the love of Mademoiselle Antoinette Jacquemin, if I should marry her, the Meximieu would so be able, by marriage, to recover Fonteneilles and I—I have refused."

"Why?"

"Because. Do you ask me why? Because that way of regaining property which one is unable to keep is horrible to me! I would never marry Mademoiselle Jacquemin, owner of Fonteneilles, and taking me back there."

The Marquis de Meximieu listened, gravely, bending a little to hear better, as at an inspection when he was asked for an explanation. He straightened up and quickly held out his hand.

"Quite right, Michel, quite right."

And as Michel looked at him, straight in the eye, astonished at the force of his grasp, he said:

"Michel, you are truly one of us! You will be at Fonteneilles to-night?"

"Very late."

"And you will remain there?"

"Until December 31st."

There was silence.

"God grant that you may be there longer!"

A sort of sorrowful smile passed over the face of the young man.

"He can, indeed, and I hope that he will. Adieu, my father."

"And I?" demanded Madame de Meximieu, rising, "and I, Michel, your mother, you are not going to kiss me?"

She came forward with her arms outstretched, her head a little bowed, her eyes heavy with regret for what she had thoughtlessly said, incapable of defending herself, weeping daintily but really weeping.

"Forgive me; you men, you reason too much. I assure you that I love you dearly; I am sorry that I have not the power. I can really do no more!"

She clasped Michel in her arms and he kissed her on the forehead without answering. He turned away. He saw his father standing in the middle of the drawing-room nodding approval to his son, but incapable of helping him, of commanding in his own house, he who made himself obeyed everywhere else; he saw his mother retiring, overcome and choking, her dress rumpled and wet with tears, her veil lifted awry, her eyes swollen and grown aged. He longed to cry out:

"You are sacrificing my youth to the few years which remain to you! And you are my father and my mother!"

But his voice failed him; perhaps his courage also.

Michel made a gesture of adieu and of despair, and went out.

VI.

THE GLOOMY SUNDAY.

Easter was late that year. It was the 22d of April, and the bells were ringing for the high mass of Quasimodo Sunday. For Lent had been over eight days. Who had observed it? The sacristan, Padovan, formerly the lock-keeper of the Nivernais canal, infirm and fat, pulled the rope in the left transept, gazing at the six porcelain vases which he had just placed on the altar, and from which arose six gold palms with roses of gold. He noticed that he had turned one of the palms wrong side forward, and he shrugged his shoulders higher than was necessary, letting the cord of the bell slip as he abused himself. "Idiot, the one time that you take them from the cupboard, not to place them facing right! Are any of the parishioners of Monsieur le Curé coming to-day? At Easter I counted ninety-two. Yes, and some famous unbelievers among them! They come at Easter, All-Saints', and to funerals. But for Quasimodo Sunday! Ah! Monsieur le Curé may as well delay his mass and let me ring. I see him making signs to me! Courage, Padovan! What good does it do? There are seven in the church. Poor curé of Fonteneilles!"

The chorister buttoned his short red cassock

slowly in the sacristy; Abbé Roubiaux put on his vestments; the flame of the wax tapers ascended in the daylight, and they would have been hardly visible if the wind, slipping through the crannies of the windows, through the doors, through the holes of the vaulted roof, had not blown down their tongues of yellow light, and made a little whirlwind of smoke at their ends which showed the presence and the life of fire. "Good people," sang the bells, "Christ has risen! He has suffered, He has returned to life! Do like Him; come, ye despised, ye humble, ye unhappy, which means all the world, and take the new life over which death shall not prevail! Come! I called your fathers and they came. I now call you." In the tower with its flattened vaults, a mere block of masonry lighted by the three east windows of the choir; in this fragment left from a larger church of which the nave had been taken away, the sound of the bells clashed in confused echoes, like spirals of smoke which mount and mingle. They spread their appeal abroad, and there, without struggle, in the great open heavens, the glorious waves of music soared; they unfolded in sonorous wreaths, above the houses and the grass and the half-clothed woods, and the waters which heard their clear call and shivered to their depths. But the men did not come.

When the curé came out of the sacristy and took his place at the altar he had, for his whole congregation, four women and one child, the little Elié Gombaud, son of the socialist lock-keeper, Père Dixneuf, retired sergeant of Zouaves, Mi-

chel de Meximieu, his valet, and the sacristan Padovan, who chanted: "*Quasi modo geniti infantes, alleluia, rationabile, sine dolo lac concupiscite, alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.*"

Where were those who did not sing the hallelujah? Some were working, as if their fatigue of six days did not need the divine rest of the seventh; they were breaking the clods in a field or working at a carpenter's bench or heating red hot the iron hoop of a cart wheel. Still others, the greater number, had already gone to the taverns, either those of the village or of the neighbouring towns, and they were drinking bad alcohol which burned into their veins, and were exchanging remarks that had no joy or healthy pleasure in them; only complaints, threats, gossip, jokes which reeked with hatred, vulgarity or wantonness. Others, unoccupied, seated in their houses, before the fire, were waiting until the hour of eating should come or until the father or the master should come in and they could go out like him and drink. Young girls were dressing for the ball, braiding or curling their hair, and thinking of the gayeties of past Sundays, enjoying the excitement which the memory awoke in them. The school-teacher, Secretary of the Mayor's office, was trying to estimate, for the official statistics, the number of geese, hens, ducks, swine, and turkeys of the country, and he varied the figures pleasantly by consulting the columns of preceding years, diminishing or increasing, with an amused smile, the animal wealth of the district. A farm hand, a former miner who came from

Calvados, where he quarrelled with his father who had reproached him for extravagance, was saying, at that very hour, to his master, the farmer of Semelin: "Give me twenty-five francs. I need to go and buy some boots at Saint-Saulge." And he set out, resolved not to buy the boots but to spend the twenty-five francs. It was the fourth pair of boots which he had bought in that way since the beginning of the year. Four young men, carrying a fishing net and lines, were starting off to poach in the pond; a lock-keeper, exhausted from having opened the lock five times in the night, between Saturday and Sunday, for the boats from Berri which came up the Nivernais canal, was snoring on the sheets of his unmade bed, while his wife, worn by fever, bloodless, exhausted by the weariness of a life without rest or hope, was dressing, washing, and scolding the five children who were crying in the foul air of the room. Others were going off on their bicycles to see some women. The entire population, unemployed for a day, was seeking to escape from their ordinary condition, and, but little able to succeed, envied all wealth as the sovereign power, the wealth of the woods, of the château, and that which is described in the continued story or told about in books. The comparison grew sharper in solitude or in talk with others. The inmost nature of the human beast, vain and violent, betrayed itself in words, gestures, and glances. They hated eyerything, more or less. An unknown passer-by who might have crossed the market town at that moment would have

been hated; legendary names were pronounced and saluted with curses and contempt; the nobles, Louis XIV., Rothschild, likewise the Government which pays poorly and which they were beginning to want to replace by another government which would pay better for less work, and, if it were possible, which would pay all their expenses, comforts, pleasures, in the town, in the province, and everywhere, without any one being forced to work at all. Ugly girls thought that with a thirty-franc hat they would have been pretty. This gross and impossible dream brutalized the souls of many who would have been proud and strong if they had been taught.

Such was the rural Sunday, a masterpiece of ennui when worship has gone out of it.

The curé said mass and he suffered unspeakably, feeling the solitude behind him, around him, everywhere! The solitude of the church, empty of the faithful; the solitude of souls, empty of the grace of God. And this was a corner of France!

When mass was finished, Abbé Roubiaux was so pale that old Perrine, the last spinner of the town, seeing him reënter the sacristy, tottering, his eyes downcast, said half aloud:

"They have sent us a curé who is like my wool; he cannot stand. I thought these Morvandians had more backbone!"

He could barely return thanks. His head in his hands and alone beneath the vault of the tower, where the bells rested motionless, he heard neither the cries of the street boys playing on the square, nor the feet of the pigeons scratching the tiles of the

roof in passing; he only heard his own soul which tossed itself from one end of the horizon to the other and from the past to the future, like muttering thunder, and which cried: "What have they done, those who had the charge of preaching the gospel here? Is it possible that six priests have been here during a century and have not stirred these ashes? Have they accepted it? Have they also been seized with this sleep of death? Or have they indeed lived five years, ten years, twenty years in the sorrow that I am feeling? My God! How horrible is this desert of souls! What would I not give to return to Morvan! To be carried on wings to Vendée, Auvergne, Brittany, to the plains of the North, no matter where, provided it was where there were living souls, around a living God! The hallelujah has fallen into space. Sins hold the country and keep it from singing. O my predecessors, I admire you, after all, for having been able to live where I stifle. You, at least, began your work and attempted something. And I, who blame you, what have I done? I have waited in the presbytery, watching the hours which have struck in solitude. What a mistake! During the six months that I have been curé of Fonteneilles I have felt, in secret, between You and me, my God, much love for them, but I have not told it enough! It is not possible that there is nothing living! I must have the power to resuscitate it since my Master has. I will go. God shall go out of His temple. I will speak to the first of my parishioners whom I meet. I would like so much

to know them! But we have no tie in common except the church where they no longer come. Nothing in common! Neither the wine shop, nor the woods, nor the farm. If some one would help me! This young Monsieur de Meximieu? I have made him only one call. I have kept away from the châteaux because the cottages are jealous. No, I must go alone. I am alone; I will bring them my sacred merchandise, which is peace. Will they listen to me? It is not insult which I ought to fear so much as this silence around me. Have mercy, Lord!"

His face wet with tears, he rose, wiped his eyes with the towel hung in the sacristy by the side of the holy-water font of green faience, and he opened the door of the tower. Between the first step and the wall a bit of wall-flower had pushed through. It bowed its head to the wind, under the feet of the abbé, who understood the caress of the flower and said:

"I thank you for greeting me; men have not done as much."

He crossed the square; it was empty. Behind the windows of the inns some tipplers were watching him and were talking about him as they would have done about any other object that was still new to them.

The curé did not even see them. The parsonage was there close by, in front of the church, on the other side of the road. Abbé Roubiaux opened the latticed gate, once white, now grimy with the touch of many hands, took a few steps in the alley which, perpendicular to the road, ran along

the side of the house and, as he passed before the kitchen door, was almost run into by a boy who came out running with his head down and an empty basket on his arm.

Upon seeing the abbé the child stopped short, lifting up his freckled, lively, open countenance which, like a round apple, reflected all the light falling upon it.

The curé gazed for a moment at the boy as if he were looking at a cherry tree in bloom, a picture by Raphael, a new church, a glacier, or the sea which he loved without having seen it. He rested his sick soul upon this little curly-headed urchin who had neither the wickedness of grown-up persons nor their hardness of heart. At least he thought so. He did not ask him from whom he came, nor for what he had come, nor what his name was. But, while the child waited, quite ready to reply correctly to these expected questions, he placed his hand on his forehead and with the thumb slowly and reverently traced the sign of the cross.

The little one understood that that meant: "Go, blessed little one!" and he ran off saying:

"Good-day, Monsieur le Curé."

The gate banged behind him.

"A *sacré gamin* whom his mother sent to collect Easter eggs," said the servant appearing on the threshold of the kitchen; "she asked for eggs, the wretched beggar, because her oldest son in time past was a chorister. Ah! I settled him, the young rogue!"

"You were wrong, Philomène."

"Yes, I know it, they might eat your bread from your plate, and you would say nothing; one sees plainly that you do not belong here. Ah! You will not change them! Will you have your dinner? It is ready."

"Not yet, Philomène. I am going to my room. I will let you know when I am hungry."

He went upstairs, crushed again by the heavy trouble which the sight of the child had lifted for a moment, and, once in his room, he seated himself before a table of pine wood on which there was only a writing pad, a bottle of ink, and a breviary, and he hid his head on the table between his folded arms. He neither slept nor wept. Soon he sat up. His thin face, with its creole eyes, dark complexion, wide ears frosted by the north wind, and the heavy jaw of the eater of hard bread, had regained its daily expression; serious, naïve, and eager. He gazed before him at a photograph fastened upon the white wall, of a little old woman, all hooded in black, whose wrinkled face still kept the eyes of a child. "Good-day, mother!" he said, "I am going to write to you!"

He tore from the pad a sheet of white paper lined with pale blue and let his pen run on:

April 22, 1906, Quasimodo Sunday.

"MOTHER: I am sad, I would like to leave here and to see you and get a breath of air from the snow of our mountains. I can see you. At the hour at which I am writing, the bells are ringing, as here, for the end of mass, but they have an

answer in the clatter of wooden shoes upon the frozen earth. You are going also, little mother; you have pulled your black hood down over your forehead; you are coming out of the church, the last one as usual; you are thinking of your son, the abbé, of the little Henri, whom you used to lead by the hand, and who has gone down, all alone, far from the village of Glux-en-Glaine, to try to convert the people of the plain of Nièvre. You are crossing the square; all our friends are there, that is to say, all the parish; men, women, children, not one would be willing to miss the mass; it is very cold; the wind from Preneley whistles, and in the forest, as in the bourg, on account of the snow, the path is only wide enough for one person. Everybody walks in single file. You, mother, enter your house, the smallest, but which has been the happiest one of Glux-en-Glaine in the days when we were there together. I feel sad, mother! I have left you for these people of Fonteneilles who do not dislike me, but who live only for the world. I have gained no hold over them during seven months that I have been their curé. My courage fails me on account of the isolation in which I live. And I have received the holy unction and I am responsible for all the faults, all the failures, all the despairing deaths, which I should have been able to prevent or to console! There were seven at high mass this morning! Everything lowers them; their nature, their ignorance and their reading which fosters it; the air is full of falsehood, even to the easy sale of their cattle. You can understand what I suffer,

mother. There are many mothers like you, who have the soul of a priest and who have bestowed it on their children. So when you receive my letter you will begin to pray for me. I know what you will do. I believe you are powerful with God and with the world because you represent the good poverty. Give me your help! I am trying to find out where to begin. Wait; I remember how, in my childhood, on wash days, you would stand there before the bundle of linen brought back from the river, which had to be "spread out" to the sun; you were discouraged by the labour before you; so many trips to make, so many times to stoop over, to pick yourself up and to lift your arms, and you would say: 'Henri, I do not know where to begin my work; I have too much to do!' Poor mother! Your little boy was not much help to you. When I had driven two stakes in the grass behind the house, I felt myself full of glory and laid down on the grass. Mother, I have not even that much help. No one has driven a single stake for me. Send me a letter and put in it a little of your courage. I am better already. I feel myself stronger, just from having written to you. I love you with all my heart, mother. And do not think me discouraged. I only needed to weep near you."

"Henri Roubiaux."

The abbé slipped the letter in an envelope, sought for a stamp among some pictures in a pasteboard box, and descended the stairway which groaned always just as we do under even

the smallest burden. As he passed by the kitchen he said:

"Philomène, you can reheat the soup now. I am going to mail a letter."

"Your soup will be fine, indeed; it is like pudding!"

The abbé, bareheaded, crossed the garden and then obliquely the little square, to the box beneath the window of the tobacco shop. As he was returning he saw on the left, going past the corner of the wall, a man of tall stature and a blond beard, who lifted his hat and put it back with an indifferent gesture.

He went toward him.

"How do you do, Gilbert Cloquet?"

"Not entirely well, but better, thank you, Monsieur le Curé; you are very kind."

"I passed by Pas-du-Loup a month ago, and I asked to see you, but Mère Justamond told me you were sleeping."

"That would have been worth waking me up for, Monsieur le Curé; but the good woman is like a dog when she is watching any one; no one must come near."

Abbé Roubiaux hesitated a moment, instinctively seeking for a word which would not be a too definite and too frank expression of his sorrow and of his reproach. But his heart overflowed. He said, clasping his hands under his cassock:

"If I am not mistaken, Gilbert Cloquet, you were not at mass Easter Sunday! And certainly you were not there this morning."

"That is so."

"Nevertheless, you belong to my parish."

"But what do you expect! It is a long time since I have been there! It is no longer our custom here."

The abbé let his hands fall, opened them and held them out as if imploring the wood-cutter:

"Ah, my friend! What martyrdom it is to be the representative here of God, whom every one forgets, whom no one loves any more!"

The workman was stirred by this grief; he gave a little start, shook his head, and said simply:

"Come, now, Monsieur le Curé, you must not worry yourself over so small a matter; we do not go to mass any more, but all the same we are not wicked people. Come, compose yourself; the old curé became used to us; you will do the same."

He felt himself looked at by eyes like those of the Christ nailed to the cross. Never had any one looked at him like that before. Something intimate and vague was touched in him and leaped like the child of a woman, and he understood that it was his life itself, the very depths of his soul which never saw the light, which had been reached by this glance. He was embarrassed. He reached his hand out to his curé to take leave.

"Do not trouble yourself so about us," he said; "I understand you just the same; it is the way I feel when the work does not go right; there is trouble for everybody in this world, one can't help thinking. Good-night, Monsieur le Curé. Good-by."

And he went on again up the slope while the curé reëntered the parsonage. For the first hun-

dred yards he thought only of this meeting with the curé of Fonteneilles. Once, even, he turned around toward the parsonage, of which he could only see a dormer window and the roof, tapering into the garden, and the boundary wall covered with the pale wistaria.

"He is a good man, this Morvandian," he murmured, "he has a heart as tender as a woman. If my dead mother had been there, she would have spoken to me just as he did."

He went on up between the houses of the village. A comrade spoke to him, then another, and another, and new ideas drove away for a time the memory of his words with Abbé Roubiaux.

Quite at the end of the village Gilbert entered a very poor house, a hovel crushed under a thatched roof which, from one rafter to the other, sank down and formed a gutter. A young man who had just finished eating was seated before a table of old cherry wood, notched by knives and worn by the hands, elbows, dishes and dish-towels of two or three generations. A woman, a fresh-looking brunette whose cheeks were red as if she had just been angry or weeping, was drying the table with a circular movement, resting her two hands upon the rolled dish-towel. Her husband bent his head and finished eating a mouthful of bread; by his side there was still a bottle half full, and a plate on which round bits of potato were swimming in vinegar and oil.

"Good-day, Durgé! You seem to have no more ragout to eat than I do!"

The young man raised his small head, covered

to the ears with a great soft felt hat. Durgé, very young, very hopeful, with shoulders which fell back squarely and easily when he stood up, had a sandy, curly beard under his chin, a short, young moustache, very red lips, a nose too short and a low forehead; he could not be called handsome, but his straightforward glance, clear as a current of water without pebbles or mud, told of strength and simplicity. He was a primitive man. One could read, in his eyes full of energy in repose, that the man had only one word, one sentiment, one idea at a time, and that he would be a power, absolutely devoted to those who should win his affection and dominate his mind. He answered the mocking greeting of Cloquet, saying:

"The Spring is not good. If the work in the woods does not come in May, I don't think that we shall have anything to raise the family which is coming."

He smiled in a way which lighted up his rustic face, and, with a movement of his eyes, he indicated his young wife whose figure was heavy.

"It is evident," replied Gilbert Cloquet, laughing also. "But I tell you, Durgé, the misfortune of misfortunes is that there is no longer hay to cut."

"No! Machines everywhere!"

"Except with Monsieur Michel. Why, I have cut his hay since I left La Vigie, for more than twenty years. What would you say if I got you engaged there?"

"I should say thanks! But you are mistaken, my friend! They are all alike; he is going to buy a mower."

"*Tonnere!*" cried Gilbert, approaching as if he were going to throw himself upon Durgé. "What did you say?"

"What I know."

"He has never had one."

"He is going to have one."

"No. He would not want to take my work from me. Twelve days of good pay! It is not possible, Durgé."

"It is," said the young man, bending to tell the story, and making the gesture of the story-teller, his elbows resting upon his knees, his hands free, his head stretching forward. "At the March fair, he met the mowing-machine merchant, and some one heard him asking the price: 'How much for the large model? How much for the American make? For yours?' Is that a proof, Cloquet, or do you want me to tell you something more?"

"I want you to come with me! We will go to find Monsieur Michel, he will listen to us; I know him. No, I answer for it that it is a falsehood."

Durgé, without rising, looked at his young wife who had grown grave as she listened to the talk of the men. She said, very low, squeezing the linen between her hands as if it were the gain of the twelve days which they wished to take from her:

"You must go, but you must not give way about the price!"

"Don't fear!" said her husband, whose eyes suddenly grew fiery. "You know me!"

In a moment the two men were together on the

threshold; together they touched the brims of their hats out of respect to the woman who, from inside the house, followed them with her glance, thinking of the things of the coming summer; then they disappeared in a path which led around the village and which rejoined the road a little lower down. They were of the same height, but the elder man was straighter and slenderer; he had a natural grace in his bearing, such as you see sometimes among the trees in the forest.

"If you are willing," he said, "we will take Dixneuf with us; he is one of the older ones who counts, like myself, on the hay of the château. He also has mowed there for twenty-two years."

The young man replied with a nod of assent. Before them, at the foot of the slope, there were only meadows where the grass was already growing thick and glossy; each particle of earth, like a vase too narrow, held its flower or its green sheaf; beneath, the water flowed invisible, and above, the brilliant rays of the sun and the breath of the wind passed over them, unfolding leaves, petals, and stalks, all full of sap. The men calculated the ground which the grass covered and the depth of the spaces that ran back into the forest. The memory of the last hay-making came to their minds, then they considered vaguely the tops of the trees, still red with the resin of the buds, but pale in spots, where the poorer soil had kept back the oaks of the forest. The hamlet of Pas-du-Loup was hidden some hundred yards from the skirts of the forest. Gilbert and Durgé went around the château and roused Dixneuf,

whom they found at home sleeping in the corner of the chimney place. The old mason, notwithstanding his apprenticeship, had never been engaged in building the houses or in repairing the bridges of the countryside. He was only employed by the master-masons in times of great urgency, when they entrusted him with the care of tempering the mortar. The man was over sixty. He was a patriot, a quarrelsome fellow, a little deaf, capable of resistance in words, but sluggish in action when the head of the wood yard or the work did not suit him. He was poor likewise. And Gilbert Cloquet thought that Dixneuf, like another older self, deserved to be pitied, helped, and hired for the hay-making.

The men, side by side, walked up toward the château of Fonteneilles, crossing the lawn which separated it from the forest. Renard, lounging about and full of importance at the top of the terrace, which the sun had left since noon to lighten the other front and the court of the house, perceived the group directing their steps toward the stone stairway.

"Hello, you fellows! What are you coming for now?"

"We want to speak with Monsieur Michel," said Gilbert, without slackening his steps.

"He is ill; he will not be able to see you. I do not know how many tramps and day-labourers have already been to see him; one would think that the master's time belonged to everybody!"

"What are you grumbling about, Renard; they have not come to see you."

Michel, hearing the noise of voices, had appeared at the corner of the château, at the right, and understood at once the cause of the discussion. He was pale and out of breath from having taken even those few steps.

He motioned to Gilbert and to the two other men saying: "Come!" and turned back into the courtyard, warmer and more furnished than the terrace. There was a long rectangle there before the door, paved with tiles, covered by an iron roof supported by three white columns. This peristyle, raised about half a foot above the ground, had been built by Michel's grandmother, an old lady who used to enjoy the warm shelter and the wide-spreading fan of the fields, which slanted up toward the village, divided in half by the avenue of beech trees. Wicker arm-chairs and garden-chairs were ranged along the wall. Michel waited, standing, for the three Fonteneilles workmen to join him. Two of them, at least, knew the way well. They trod it with a kind of security and pride, as if they thought: "Renard had the worst of it. We are more important than he is; besides, this is not the first time that we have been rightly treated here."

All three saluted together, with hat and head, and Gilbert, who took precedence over the others by virtue of being well known and also a ready speaker, asked:

"They say you are ill, Monsieur Michel. You must not receive us if it disturbs you."

The young man shook the three hands which were held out to him.

"Come just the same. As long as I am on my feet I shall be at your service. What can I do for you?"

Neither of the three men replied to this question which was too abrupt. They had first to sit down and talk of unimportant things. They took the chairs which Michel pointed out to them, seated themselves, uttered a few profound remarks about the weather and then Gilbert, pulling his tawny beard and looking at the master, said:

"Monsieur Michel, is it true that you have thought of mowing with a machine?"

"I have thought of it, that is true, Gilbert, but I have decided nothing."

"You are thinking of it: that is bad."

"Why?"

"Because it will do us harm, Monsieur Michel. Have I worked badly?"

"And I," said Dixneuf, louder. "Haven't you been satisfied with me all these years? Since I began long ago to work in your meadows?"

"The workman must live," added Durgé, thrusting forward his young head as if to charge an enemy. "The machines steal the work from the workman!"

"You will not do that, Monsieur Michel? That would not be fair!"

"Nor for your own interest, either!"

"Nor for peace!"

The three voices became excited and the men drew their chairs nearer to Michel's, who waited and watched each speaker in silence.

"There are enough people who have given up

reaping by hand. You are the only one left. Your father and your grandmother gave us work!"

"Do not buy machines, Monsieur! It is for your own interest, I warn you."

"No, Durgé," interrupted Gilbert; "you ought to say it is for us, from friendship for us, to give us work, that we ask you not to buy a machine."

"Twelve days at least; perhaps fifteen or twenty lost days, if you should do it!"

"He is right, Monsieur; down with the machines! Give work!"

"Yes, Monsieur, give it to us!"

Eager, and divided between anger and the fear of displeasing and the thought of the days of enforced idleness, the three reapers questioned the owner of the harvest, and, if the eyes of the two older men did not threaten, there was revolt and defiance in the face of the youngest, the red-headed Durgé.

They had finished speaking but their mouths remained half open, ready to protest or to complain. The three men were in the same positions, only their expressions were different. They were bending forward as if to receive their bread.

"Listen, Gilbert, and you, Dixneuf, and remember what I am going to say to you. For your sake, who are old friends of our house, I will give up buying a machine this year, but on one express condition: the price of the day's work shall not exceed three francs."

"That is perfectly fair," said Gilbert.

"The union is satisfied with that for the Spring work," said Dixneuf. "We can agree on that."

"Three francs fifty," said Durgé eagerly. "For hard work, like the meadows, we must demand that much."

"I will pay three francs, no more than that. You can calculate that ten reapers, at three francs each, during fifteen or eighteen days, is the price of the machine itself that I am giving you. I only give up my idea for your sake and in your interest. For myself, I am not doing a very reasonable thing. But I am willing to do it because it is to your advantage. Is that understood?"

"Three francs fifty," said Durgé; "I won't work for less."

"Very well, I engage only Gilbert and Dixneuf," said Michel, rising. "I am sorry to lose you, Durgé, for you are a good workman. *Au revoir.*"

The two older men were satisfied but they did not dare show it too plainly. Durgé, obstinately silent, with a hard and insolent air, scarcely nodded his head in taking leave of Michel de Meximieu. The three companions went up the avenue together. They did not begin to talk among themselves until they were far from the château. Michel, who watched them go, saddened by the constantly recurring discord which kept men's spirits at variance much more than mere money questions, saw that the men were arguing, and that Durgé, who had been constrained and dumb before, was now gesticulating violently between the two elder men, who were silent. "Feeble and rebellious souls! What can be done? And it is the whole world, all the country, and all the town! Did Gilbert understand my intention,

what was really my generosity? Perhaps. Dixneuf certainly did not take it in at all. Durgé carries away only another argument against the rich. He believes that I wanted to exploit him and is proud of not having yielded. What words can touch these hearts which actions have no effect upon? What is the right way? Oh, how willingly would I follow it! One would think that we belonged to another race than theirs. There is something between us, and I do not know what to call it, nor how to break through it. I hoped, by yielding, to make a sacrifice worthy of acknowledgment."

He glanced down the deserted avenue.

"What does it matter to me, after all? My duty will not last. Others will accomplish the hard task which I have scarcely begun, and—Others!"

A vision rose in his mind, that of a girl with hair of two shades of gold. He saw her there, close to him, in the gravel court of the château, and he had such power of imagination, so perfect a memory of objects and colours and motions that it was really Antoinette Jacquemin who passed by without looking at him on her way toward the servants' quarters and the farm, and was greeted from a distance by the men who were ploughing the field in front of the château, as the one on whom all the future of the estate depended.

"Others will take my place, and they will remember me but rarely!"

He began to weep, buried in the rough arm-

chair, his eyes closed, certain that no one would be a witness of his weakness.

Michel de Meximieu knew that he was very ill. Since his boyhood he had had trouble with his heart, unsuspected or not admitted by the physicians, and which the violent emotions of the last months had aggravated. On his return from Paris, troubled by attacks of suffocation and the extreme feverish weakness which they left behind and which his will was no longer able to control as before, he had consulted doctors at Corbigny and at Nevers. The first had said: "It is nothing; but not too much anxiety, not too much imagination!" A second, when Michel insisted that he wished to know, had been less discreet, and the conversation had ended with these words:

"I must know whether I shall live. I am one of those who prefer to know the enemy, and I hope to face it squarely. Tell me the truth."

"Well, then, Monsieur, with your trouble, a happy man like you may live a long time."

"And if I were not happy?"

The physician was silent.

"Then I am lost."

He had pronounced his own sentence. But the next day, even that very evening, and every day since then he had refused to believe it. It rose before him and he chased it away. It returned, and then to convict it of falsehood, he called for help to his youth which wished to live; his noble ambition which should give him the right of life; this effort to lift and help all the

degraded country people. A fierce struggle, without witnesses, without a friend, without a comfort of any kind, which he had to leave at any moment, to give an order, or to receive a farmer, an overseer or a visit. It was often renewed. A thousand reasons incessantly renewed, cried out around him: "You are going to die without being of any use, Michel de Meximieu, and nothing will be accomplished of all that you have dreamed." These crises were brought on by physical suffering; by the memory of conversations that he had had in the smoking-room, or at Paris, with his father; by the bitter thought of Vaucreuse and of Antoinette Jacquemin; by the sight of the fields and the forests which were soon to pass into other hands, or as just now, by an ungrateful reply from the men, or a refusal to compromise, which showed how sick with hatred were their hearts.

Sunday had scattered the labourers. The heat kept them away. Michel was suffering. The hours passed.

But he had reached that point when pain, for a long time cursed, is at last accepted and begins at once to lose its power. This long Spring afternoon, the solitude, the stillness, these tears which were drying on a countenance whose energy they had not effaced, and which began to recover a calm smile, were all the visible signs of a great victory: a man who had accepted death! He found himself again in the spirit of his fathers, soldiers and men of deep faith. He was more courageous than all the others. He no longer

trembled for himself, and he had the whole earth beneath his feet. He said: "Enough tears! I will shed no more. This is the tenth time that I have wept for myself. It is nine too many. Happily I have realized to-day that there is in my suffering a regret that I did not sacrifice myself—that grief I shall take with me. These poor souls so rarely have any one who will give himself entirely for them. What an admirable feudality the world might be. A sovereign soul, that is to say, a saint in every quarter to defend the timid! A warrior! A citadel! They will have the abbé at Fonteneilles. Yes, I have faith. And then, who knows from what thicket the lily of the valley springs, a single stalk of which fills the whole woods around with perfume? No one knows. It springs up from the dead mould. From among themselves a redeemer may rise up. There will be need of one, a man of the poor, to lift up the poor. And it is for that, perhaps, that I am preparing the way. Who knows?"

The sun penetrated beneath the iron roof and illumined Michel, who began again to watch the daylight fade away. When the valet came about six o'clock, to ask for orders, he could not help saying:

"Monsieur le Comte is better; he looks like himself again."

Sunday ended peacefully. Some shouts still came down from the village from the half-drunken men trying to sing as they left the inns. There was no wind. The poachers knew that there would be no moon. When night had swept into her

folds the remains of the gold which trails over the fields toward evening, there was an hour of freshness, when the grass began to drink up the dew. The noise of steps was deadened, and the sweetness of the air, penetrating through the open doors, brought women and children to the threshold. They looked out, moved by the unknown charm, and said: "It is mild." Abbé Roubiaux, who was walking in his path of boxwood, inhaling the perfume which came from the woods, closed his breviary under his thumb, lifted his eyes, and murmured: "After all, hallelujah!" Upon the heights of La Vigie, old Fortier, who every evening watched the stars and the clouds glide above the woods, noticed that the sky was saturated with water as if all the stars were weeping, and he said: "I shall have sixty loads of hay again this year."

On the edge of the pond of Vaux, in the ravine which sinks down, quite sharply, to the northwest, a man was stretching hoop-nets. Shod with sandals, his trousers rolled up above his knees, he took one of the long willow traps hidden in a thicket of brush, listened, looked over at the opposite bank, then, almost certain of not being watched—for the forest was dark and the trees dipped their budding branches into the water—he went down the miry bank, staggering on the slimy sods, bent over, and placed the snare among the reeds. Supiat Gueule de Renard was just taking from the hiding-place where he had put them to dry, his sixth eel net, when he heard a

noise of moving branches, to his left, rather near. With a supple movement he knelt at once upon the ground, lowering the net cautiously, and laid down beside it. The croaking of frogs; the shrill chirping of crickets at the entrance of their caves; the diving of a fish, leaping for a star, filled the silence of the night. Then the song of the golden oriole, very softly modulated from the same part of the woods where the branches had moved, made the poacher get up. He called cautiously:

"Is it you, Durgé? You startled me."

Without precaution and pushing back the underbrush from his waist and shoulders, the young labourer came straight to Supiat who saw, in the shadow, the glistening white teeth and the eyes of Durgé, who was laughing.

"When I did not find you at the house I guessed that you were fishing for eels, Gueule de Renard, and I came here. I have seen the Count."

"Is he as ill as they say?"

"Yes, and it seemed to me that he breathed badly."

"I should not weep for him! He is a bourgeois who will have influence here. He has the knack of making men believe that he is interested in them. If he has his hay cut by hand, that will make ten men more who will think themselves under obligations to him. How much did he offer you?"

"Three francs. The two old men have accepted. But I refused; they were furious!"

"Good!"

Supiat began to laugh and lifted his face in the

pale light of the night like a beast scenting the wind.

"Well, Durgé, then everything is settled?"

"*Parbleu!* That is what I came to tell you.

"I will warn that imbecile Ravoux, whom I can stir up by talking about justice and the exploitation by the proprietors; he will forbid Cloquet and Dixneuf, in the name of the union, to accept three francs; he will go himself to the master, who will lose his temper and talk of promises and agreements.

"I will answer for that: he has said that he would not give in."

"And the master buys his machine, and Meximieu is a little more hated. Come, old fellow, that is all right. I am going to throw my last net."

He took the willow trap from the grass all covered with dry mud, raised it, and went forward a little toward the left to the place where the bank, overhanging by a foot the water of the pond, allowed him easily to throw the net between the reeds.

He came back rubbing the calves of his legs stained with the mud, picked up his sabots which he had left at the foot of a tree, and tapping Durgé on the shoulder, said:

"There is also a comrade who must be thrown down, Durgé. You know very well who. I have had members of the union, even the young ones, reproaching me for the beating which I gave him. He could easily form a party, that old man; he is cunning."

"You have not heard 'the latest news,' as the papers say?"

"What is that?"

"His daughter is completely ruined. She owes money to more than twenty people of the village and the town. Before a month is up the bailiff will be in the house."

"That may be, but that won't finish the old man. His daughter—that's like a squirrel's nest in the trunk of a tree; that will not kill him."

Durgé tossed his head, pricked up his ears, and listened a moment before beginning to walk on again.

"All the same, there will be debts that will trouble him," he said.

The two men, single file, plunged into the woods. The corner of the pond of Vaux, where the ripples which the casting of the hoop-net had made were already widened and spread out upon the banks in little waves, continued to reflect the twinkling of the stars. Everything slept on the farms. Some ducks, turned out on the lake, called to the flocks of wild ducks which were passing invisible. Gilbert Cloquet had gone to bed; Michel de Meximieu was reading in his room with the window half open. Their two names continued to be pronounced quite low, associated together by the cunning hatred of the worst blackguard of Fonteneilles.

VII.

THE HAY.

GILBERT was to lose the work of cutting the hay. The mowing machine had been bought. Toward the end of May they had seen it, with its wheels and seat painted bright vermilion, its sharp saw teeth, its shaft bearing the trade mark of the factory, carried upon a dray, like a statue in a procession, through the country where everything is noticed but little is said.

Then the day-labourer, the man whom the ruin of Marie Lureux kept awake every night, had asked for work with the women weeders from Fonteneilles who went into the half-grown grain. They went through it, each taking one of the narrow little paths which the furrows make between the planted rows; they went slowly, careful not to bruise the ears of wheat, bending over, one hand behind the back holding a handful of weeds, feeling with the other, here and there, among the young grain, wherever a thistle or a poppy or a corn flower or a spear of vetch from an old sowing, or a sharp-pointed bud of fennel pushed up. He earned little. Most of the women made fun of him and they were jealous of this man who was taking the bread from the women. He felt this passing loss of prestige so he did not

stop working with them when, at the end of the furrows, they straightened themselves up, drew a long breath and gossiped a little, trying to guess the time of day; but he hurried back into the thicket of grain, eager to escape and to hide his beard between the green walls which grew higher each day. He thought most of all of his daughter and of the shame which had come to him. But he did not know the whole of his misfortune. The women knew it; and yet not one of them had dared to say: "Gilbert Cloquet, you have watched poorly over your children at the farm of Épine. For the bailiff, the last day of May, went through the stables with his paper; and he went into the stalls, but a part of the animals had been taken away before he came, and he made no note of them. You have not met them, Cloquet, but everybody knew that they were in the woods; the best mare, the black one, three cows, and four sheep, watched by a good-for-nothing boy picked up on the road. They swore, your son-in-law and your daughter, yes, swore that they concealed nothing, so they are liars and when the sale comes off they will be thieves."

He did not know it. He had not gone to Épine since his daughter had driven him away. She had come to ask his pardon and to ask for money. As he had only his pardon to give, she had never returned. It was June. The summer time before the harvest, when the earth is all clothed. Around Fonteneilles, and on the brow of the hills, and upon the double slope of the meadows which descend to the lake with a blue

stream in the middle, barely opened like a forgotten book, the grass was beginning to swell. It was ripe. One evening Michel de Meximieu summoned his overseer and, pointing out the long strip of meadow land which rose to the South, between the edge of the wood, and the hedge of a field of oats, he said:

"We will cut that to-morrow. Send two men to make the path and to cut the brambles, before five o'clock."

The last day dawned for the grass. The morning was clear. The long meadow began thirty yards from the château, rose gently, followed the curve of the forest, descended the slope on the other side of the hill, beyond a nettle tree which stood out against the open sky. No ray of sun had yet touched the nettle tree, nor the oats which watched at the outskirts of the wood. But the grass felt the coming of the day; a vigorous and silent life stirred it; the buttercups, grouped in large spots, unfolded their petals which the night had curled up; the dandelions spread their bundles of yellow swords; the daisies, which the darkness does not close, turned their full face toward the coming sun; a warm breath intensified in the countless seeds, in the ears, in the clusters and the tendrils, in the umbels and the pods, the perfumed oil which surrounds the germ. The soft wind, passing in puffs as over a calm sea, powdered itself with pollen, and grew heavy with the taste of the honey. The long sheet undulated; not a stalk was bruised, not a single one was dead, but the colour of the waves proclaimed that

the harvest was ripe. The fields were brown and gray and shone like silver, and they had here and there blood-red shadows like rust on things which have lasted a long time. When the two servants entered the lower end of the field, through the white gate, a partridge, which had its nest in the grass, flew away; an oriole rose from a border oak and let itself be carried away by the wind, the ardent wing of the sun; a corn-flake slipped through between the tufts and flew up into the thicket uttering its harsh *crex crex* like a toad, and there followed then a silence of terror in the world of the animals who had been in the grain and had grown up with it, and believed in it. The very crickets were silent for a moment. The scythe traced a path, and the pruning knife broke down the brambles on the edge of the large meadow.

At nine o'clock it was hot. The gate again opened and two black horses came through, harnessed to the mowing machine. Where were the people of Fonteneilles, those who had cried out against the machine and those who had craftily broken the agreement made with Gilbert Cloquet, and had caused the purchase of the starver, the enemy, which rolled in resplendent in its bright red paint, upon its new wheels, behind the patient horses? There was no one to be seen in the oat field, the leaves of the forest drooped limp with the heat; since daybreak only one man had passed, a shepherd going up the hill toward the pasture where Monsieur Fortier was fattening his white cattle. Who was going to drive the ma-

chine? Ah! If they had known! The whole hamlet would have been there! It was Michel de Meximieu who came out of the château, in a suit of white linen with a straw hat on his head, and took his place upon the iron seat, above the cutting bar. Renard, who was holding the horses, said for the last time:

"Monsieur le Comte can see that there are no bad fellows about. Tired as he is, he should not to do the work of a labourer. If Monsieur le Comte would let me, I would be able."

"Thanks, Renard. I do believe that all the tales which have been told me are nothing but pure inventions; but it is enough that they have threatened; I am not one to expose others."

He took the reins and he chirruped; the scorching rays of the sun flashed from the reins of the horses as they started. The teeth of the saw took hold of the grass, and the cut grass fell, slipped upon the floor of the machine, then fell again, all shining, upon the ground, moist still along the stalk and pink near the root. Behind the machine, which went on without a pause, with a regular click, click, it formed a wake, a long mirror of shining grain which the light finally reached and dried. Michel enjoyed the perfection of the machine's work and especially the feeling of being the master who worked and was closer to his harvest than any man of his race had been before. He drove rapidly and rejoined the servants who were a little distance from the top of the hill.

"Let me pass!" he cried. "I will go straight into the hay without a path!"

He sacrificed a few tufts of grass. What did that matter to him? This year would end it all for him. The horses were steaming with sweat. Suddenly one of them staggered, fell down almost, and then reared up with an effort; the machine lifted to one side, fell back, turned as upon a pivot, and the driver was pitched to the ground, three feet away, in the grass. The mower was broken. Michel picked himself up and ran to the horses and stopped them. At the same instant two men showed themselves standing at the edge of the forest, while on the other side, in the field of oats, which was separated from the meadow only by a hedge, another man appeared and cried: "Bravo, down with the bourgeois!" Michel turned in that direction, but he saw nothing. He walked toward the place where the machine had struck against an obstacle. The two servants ran and searched in the grass.

"Here it is Monsieur Michel" said one of them. "Look!"

He held up in his hand the twisted end of an iron wire which, during the night, some one must have stretched between two stakes, hidden in the tall grass.

"That is Supiat's work again; I'm sure of it," he cried.

"Yes it was he who was hidden in the oats! I recognized him! I will run after him. To break the machine! Ah! He'll find out!" said the other.

"Take back the horses," said Michel, stopping the man who had already started to run. "Leave Supiat and the others, if there are any. In two

days I shall have a new reaper and I will drive it myself as I have this one. I order you to tell that through the country."

"You are not hurt, Monsieur Michel?"

"No, very little."

"But you are so pale. You look—"

"Do not worry. Go on back to the farm."

At that moment a voice called out:

"Monsieur de Meximieu?"

Before turning, Michel knew who called him. Antoinette Jacquemin was standing at the foot of the nettle tree, her slim figure outlined at the top of the great bend of the meadow, and she made a signal: "Come! Come!"

Michel went straight toward her through the tall grass. The servants went down toward the château, leading the horses and the broken machine. She had chosen her hour well, the little girl of Vaucreuse! Must he really obey her? He still had time to stop, to find an excuse for returning to the château. "Why not avoid her? What am I doing? What can she do for me? And what can I say to her? Am I going to complain about the ruin of my father, and because Fonteneilles does not belong to me any more? She knows nothing of it. Am I going to let her see that I might have loved her, that I love her already? I can no longer do so. And she is too young for me to tell her the other grief, the third, which will deliver me from the other two. Her eighteen years should be happy. Take care! No tears! No weakness! And I feel weaker than ever! Why am I going to her, then?" He was

going because she was sympathy, and because no one comforted him. He was going with his secret which he would not tell, but which perhaps she would divine.

He had changed greatly since the visit to Vaucreuse. His face had grown thin; the severe expression of his eyes was softened by suffering; they had had visions which had left them more anxious, more tender, and veiled with mist. Antoinette Jacquemin watched him as he came up. At first she had asked herself: "Poor neighbour, ought I to joke with him about his fall? He does not limp. His hat is a little battered and he has some grass stains on his sleeve." She had been thrown from her horse more than once. Her gayety was more ready even than her sympathy. But it was sympathy which spoke as soon as Michel was near enough for a look to make itself felt, at the distance where souls begin to touch each other by their antennæ which hesitate and draw back.

"I hope you are not hurt, Monsieur?"

"No, Mademoiselle."

"What has happened? Why did the mowing machine upset? Was it a stone?"

"A trap for the bourgeois, Mademoiselle, a steel wire stretched last night to trip my horses and to break my machine."

"How dreadful! But how pale you are, Monsieur! What an infamous thing to do, and what a cowardly one! I came to Fonteneilles this morning with the cart which was going for supplies. I am inquisitive. I wished to see this

mowing machine, about which the country has talked more than it deserved, begin its career. And also, to see you again. You remember my promise. Sit down, Monsieur, there, at the foot of my tree. No? I assure you that you need to rest yourself."

"No, I need to clasp a friendly hand."

"Then take mine."

Michel found again the same motherly child, used to consoling griefs which she did not understand, that he had seen at Vaucreuse. She looked at him with an anxious tenderness, her great eyes open, her face all golden from the shadow of her hair and her straw hat and the morning light which was reflected from the grass. She said nothing, but with so little encouragement she would have said: "I love you," that Michel was afraid of this silence in which the avowal grew too quickly. He broke the charm, turning aside a step. Their hands which were united unclasped. And it was a farewell which only one of the two understood.

"Then, I was right to come? The idea was not too 'childish,' as you say?"

"No, it was a kind thought, true and timely, for which I thank you. I cannot tell you how much I am moved to see you on this land of Fonteneilles."

"I came to the boundary of the château once before, eight days ago. I saw you in the distance. But I was with Miss Margaret Brown, my governess, and I could not have stopped for a friendly talk. What is the good of a common-

place good-morning, the pretence of surprise, and the regret of having passed by without being a soul which thinks and listens? What good would that be?"

He received the words, one after the other, as arrows which pierce the same wound. But he did not appear to have heard, and went on with his thought:

"Yes, you were right to come so that I can show you myself a little of this estate of which I love even the least hillock! Look at that long meadow leading toward the house. It is almost a valley, is it not? How nobly the slope is modelled!"

"And all in bloom. To-morrow it will be less beautiful; when the hay falls, something sympathetic goes. For my part, I close my eyes when they mow the hay at Vaucreuse. With us it is the season which changes the landscape. We have not that great line of lofty forest trees."

"You will have it some day."

"One like it? That is impossible."

"Who knows?"

"Oh, I know. It takes centuries, one at least. How old are your oaks? That one there? And the other, which has some dead branches for the ring-doves?"

"One hundred and sixty and two hundred years. My grandfather planted them."

"We have been at Vaucreuse a much shorter time. Here time has done its work. Your château is half surrounded by the woods, and it seems to me—"

She pointed with a gesture to the old tiles of the roof, lower than the tree tops.

"It seems to me that in the autumn, when it is all covered with dead leaves, it must be a part of the forest! It is like one more old oak."

"I beg of you to love it."

"But I do love it like all the country."

"Be the one who does not leave her lands for Paris?"

"Must I swear it? I am quite ready."

"Do not laugh! Do not take my words in jest. I am speaking to you more seriously than you think. I beg of you, Mademoiselle Antoinette, as if I were an older brother, to stay in this country where your name is respected, where, personally, you are loved; do not speak evil of it because it is more suffering than many other parts of France, but do for it what our parents have not known how to do: live in it. Merely by living in it you will be a real *grande dame*, a being of graciousness and of compassion."

"I assure you, Monsieur, that that would be my ambition, and surely the ambition of any other woman in my place. But you speak so strangely."

"How?"

"As of something that you wish, but that you will not see."

"It is true. I shall not see it."

Mademoiselle Jacquemin bent forward, astonished.

"You will no longer be here? Where will you be, then?"

Michel felt Antoinette's eyes fixed upon him

and saw her smile vanish, and her anxiety increase as the silence was prolonged. He made an effort to control his voice which refused to speak. His face remained turned toward Fonteneilles in the distance.

"Promise me to keep my secret."

"Yes."

"I am betrothed."

She drew back, in her turn, as if death had passed between them. And she drew herself up.

Another Antoinette was there, no longer a child, a woman, wounded, irritated, as strong as he in the pain of love. No, she would not weep! He should not be allowed to measure the pain which he had just inflicted. Very pale, with her fine, haughty head thrown back, and her eyelids half lowered with scorn, she found words to reply, she threw them from the end of her blanched lips.

"I congratulate you. But I do not see why I am the first to be told. In truth, it is too much honour. She is young?"

Michel shook his head.

"She is rich, assuredly. A Meximieu can only make a rich marriage."

"Yes. She has all the millions that she wishes. She has only to stoop and take them."

"How strangely you say that. And she takes you far away, since you are leaving Fonteneilles?"

"Very far."

"It will be soon?"

Michel closed his eyes.

"I do not know."

"You are more and more strange. Excuse

me! I must rejoin my carriage, which waits for me at the hamlet. And of what I have said to to you, remember only one thing, the only one which may be true—"

She gave a little nervous laugh which died in the loneliness.

"I had come only to repeat to you my remark; you must remember it, that you knew how to make yourself loved. I was right, you see!"

The tip of her yellow boot struck a tuft of grass and crushed it. Michel, for the first time, had the courage to look at the new Antoinette Jacquemin. He saw her draw back again. He said to her slowly, for he was prolonging at the same time his agony and his last vision of love:

"Do not speak in that way. You will regret what one day you will call your injustice. But I beg you in advance, do not accuse yourself, when you shall comprehend and when you shall know all. I should have too much sorrow knowing you were sad. You have done me no wrong, not a single one. I assure you—do not answer, I beg you—as I have done none to you. You have been the first delicious apparition in my life, and all that you have said to me, even your reproaches, all has shown me the chosen being near whom I would have passed—I wish that you may be infinitely happy,—adieu.—Thanks."

"Adieu, Monsieur."

She remained standing erect, silent and haughty, until he had regained the green path which the machine and the scythe had cut. Then, seeing that he was far, and that he did not turn round,

she approached the nettle tree, leaned her hand upon the trunk, and, her head on her hand, she watched disappear along the hedge, he whom she had waited for with joy. When he was close to the barrier of the meadow, she hoped that he would look back, at least once. But the gate was open. He passed in. Antoinette noticed that the trees of Fonteneilles trembled before her. She was weeping.

Michel was stirred to the depths of his soul. Like many men of very strong spiritual life and much alone, he was accustomed, when he had acted, to examine his act and to judge himself. In the smoking-room, in which he had shut himself, he paced up and down, his eyes fastened upon the floor, where his shadow preceded him from one window to the other. "It was necessary that I should be abandoned. I think that is accomplished. I have been able to tell her, without her comprehending why, my last wish. That this land should not suffer because all the Meximieus have deserted it. Now I have hope. She will understand. The words which she said to me were inspired by her anger, her wounded pride, her poor tenderness which she thought misunderstood. But all that will pass. How strong she was! What a soul of a woman and of a heroine is already in her! What dignity in this first grief, which I have brought her. I—I—Ah! How unhappy I am! How I long to weep! But I must not! I have promised!"

To keep himself from breaking down, he gave himself witnesses. He rang for his valet; then,

having changed his dress, he went to the stables and inquired about the horses. The farm hands of Fonteneilles and the servants said: "He is beginning again to take an interest in the land."

As soon as he had finished lunch, he went out, as he used to do, and entered the wide avenue. A strong force, either of his will or of his grief, hurried him along and supported him. He walked briskly. Without getting out of breath, he went up, under the burning sun, the path which leads to the hamlet.

It was the hour when all the country sleeps save for the singing of the gnats. When Michel pushed open the lattice gate of the rectory and asked, standing upon the threshold of the kitchen: "Is Monsieur le Curé at home?" no one answered. He repeated the question, stepping back a couple of steps to the middle of the boxwood path. Then a window on the first story began a struggle with a hand which tried to open it, and yielded, not without grumbling. The curé leaned out in the sunlight above the walk.

"Who is there? Ah! it is you, Monsieur Michel? Philomène must be taking her mid-day nap. I will come down."

"No, Monsieur le Curé, I will come up. I can come up to-day."

At the top of the wooden stairway, he found Abbé Roubiaux, who ushered him into a room furnished only by four chairs, a table, and the photograph of his old mother. Upon the table a register was open, and a note book lay by its side, between whose pages the abbé, before open-

ing the window, had slipped a sheet of blotting paper.

"I heard what happened this morning," said the priest. "It must have been very painful to you."

"Yes. Five years of good will, rewarded in that way."

"Oh, do not think your good will lost, Monsieur Michel. I am sure that it has touched some one of these silent ones who surround you. Come, I am sure, that you have already forgiven it as —as a gentleman."

"You are mistaken."

"Really? Are you still angry with them?"

"No, you mistake the term. Monsieur le Curé, let me tell you that we do not know each other well—and that I regret it. You have been afraid, I am sure, that people would say here, that the curé was too friendly with the château. But, when the château means a man of your own age, or almost so, one who is not of the world, and whose youth is not gay, I assure you, why avoid him? Come, if we had talked heart to heart, two or three times only, just now you would have said to me "forgive it as a Christian." That is the right word. For me, Christ is the type of gentleman."

The abbé rose hastily, his worn face transfigured with joy. He held out his hand.

"What you say is very fine!"

"No, it is only the truth, what you believe, and what I believe. My dream, like yours, has been to raise them gradually to that height, and

to go leaving a work greater than myself, to be the workman who has helped to build the spire of a cathedral. But that needs more time than I shall have. One can barely see the foundations in the mud."

Abbé Roubiaux had drawn his chair closer to that of Michel. Now he was no longer afraid. He dared to speak, he dared to be himself. He let his priest's heart speak, that heart still enthusiastic and naïve, the spirit of a seminarist, aspiring to the conquest of the world, but saddened by the memory of the first disappointments of his work. He clasped his hands beneath his cassock. He spoke of his former plans, when he was vicar in Morvan, and how he had found them unpracticable since he came to Fonteneilles; he told of his misunderstood appeals; his vain waitings at the confessional, in the parsonage or on the highways, when he had so ardently wished that the people would come to him, and they had passed by; he humiliated himself for not having yet succeeded; he let it be seen that his sympathy for "his flock" had remained unchanged, and that his disappointed hope always revived again, reached its own level, like water which has come from far. It was truly the son of Mère Roubiaux who spoke; a child of the people ordained for the salvation of others, puny in aspect, but conscious of the grandeur of his mission and ambitious as an emperor, one of those weak ones whom the breath from on high transfigures, and who show it unexpectedly by their closeness to the divine. He was emboldened even to call

Michel "my friend." Michel listened, sure now that he had found a strong soul among the obscure élite of the world, one in whom he could confide.

"Would you believe," said Abbé Roubiaux, "that I have a great sacrifice to make, and that I have hesitated? Yet nothing flourishes without sacrifice. It is the fertilizer of the eternal fields. Our joys, our tastes, our repose, are beautiful stalks cut, chopped, trodden under foot, and which fill us with pity, but which spring forth again in wonders. I have been cowardly. Would you believe that my bishop has asked me—"

"What?"

"To take up a collection from house to house for the church! In Fonteneilles!"

"Poor Monsieur l'Abbé!"

"He has asked me twice. And I have refused. I have written: 'I will make the announcement at high mass; I will receive the offerings that any of my parishioners shall be willing to bring to make good the allowances of the concordat which have been suppressed. But it is useless to solicit from house to house. They would welcome me nearly everywhere, that I am sure of, but they would give scarcely anywhere."

"What did the bishop reply?"

"He replied: 'Make the collection, were it only to know your parish.' I set out, I went in person to see my bishop; I entreated him; I said to him: 'But I know this parish! What is the use of asking from these men and women who do not even come to mass, who work on Sunday, who swear

like devils and amuse themselves in the same way. To preach to them? I am glad to do that. To serve them? Oh! With all my unemployed heart! To be their misunderstood friend, scoffed at, struck perhaps; again, yes. But to provoke a reply of indifference or of hatred, and to count each time: "Another one who denies his God! Another and another!" That is an agony beyond my strength, Monseigneur.'"

"Was he weak enough to listen to you?"

"No, he repeated to me: 'I give you the command, for the third time, to go everywhere. The time has come when payment must be demanded from France for her baptism. Go, my friend, and be not afraid.'"

"And then?"

"You see, I have decided; I am preparing my list."

There was silence.

"Monsieur l'Abbé," said Michel, "I have a story to tell you—very like your own. I also, I shrank from the sacrifice that is demanded from me!"

"Is it as hard as mine? Ah, then, I pity you!"

"Harder, perhaps. But I believe that now, since this morning especially, it is accepted. I am going to tell you about it to be still more certain that I have made it. Monsieur l'Abbé, I am very ill."

"My friend, you are perhaps not well, you must—"

"It is hopeless, that is the truth; my physician has let me understand it. I have read it in medi-

cal books, and besides, I feel it only too well. Do not try to deny it; it is no use. You know better what I am since this last half hour. I would have liked to help you to restore this parish; I would have liked to redeem all the faults that the Meximieus have committed against it; all their negligences, their absences. I could have been just and fraternal without effort, I think. That would have been the best way, without doubt. I shall not have the time. Monsieur l'Abbé, tell me, in all truth, if you believe that my acceptance of the death, which is coming, may be powerful before God?"

"Infinitely so," said the abbé, "as powerful as the most difficult obedience and the most sublime prayer."

"Then, since I have not been able to give my example and my heart, I give my life that Fonteneilles may live again. I accept my death. It is all which remains to me, Monsieur l'Abbé. Adieu."

He tried to smile, and he succeeded. His lips, which had just named death, remained bravely parted; his eyes looked on it and did not waver. He had the air of a page before the enemy, ironical, amiable, careless, the air which each Meximieu had had in his first battle, when he sprang on his horse, the trumpets sounding, and drew his sword in the service of the king. Poor youth. He had their age; he had their manner and he also smiled in the face of danger, but he had no witness but a village priest; he did not expect glory, and the king for whom he accepted death would never know of it.

It was a fine expression of youth, which lasted only the time of a salute. Then his lips relaxed. No more words were said. The two men had risen.

Their looks still spoke to each other as those who find words too feeble to express the inmost feelings of their souls. There was no emotion, no vain consolation. The abbé accompanied Michel as far as the garden gate. The one as pale as the other, but the least troubled of the two appeared to be Michel de Meximieu.

"I shall come to see you," said Abbé Roubiaux. "Ah! Monsieur Michel, if there was only a man in each château, a man in each parish!"

Michel was already at the corner of the house, on the square. He went down the road. A woman here and there raised the window curtain with the finger holding the needle and said:

"He has just been to call on the curé. The rich, they have always time to spare."

The heat passed over the country in stifling puffs which smelt of hay. The dust upon the road rose in whirlwinds. A storm cloud, all white with reflections like copper, came on, piling up its successive peaks above the woods. Michel reached his château overwhelmed by fatigue. But, for the first time in years, he had peace within.

VIII.

ABBÉ ROUBIAUX'S COLLECTION.

THE people of Fonteneilles talked together of the sale to be held at Épine on Sunday, July the twenty-second. A notice, posted on the walls of the Mayor's office, announced this "voluntary" sale and enumerated the objects to be sold at the auction.

Since it had been there, Gilbert kept away. He did not show himself any more in the hamlet on account of this sheet of red paper; he was working at the harvest on a distant farm, and returned only on Saturday to his house at Pas-du-Loup, avoiding meeting his former friends and taking by-paths in place of the roads, ashamed and irritated at having his children bankrupts.

Abbé Roubiaux, called away by his sick mother, had left his parish before beginning the collection which he had promised to make, and, on his return to Fonteneilles, he put off from day to day his unpleasant task.

When the sun rose, on the nineteenth of July, the atmosphere was hot and still filled with the dust of yesterday. During six weeks the earth had suffered from drought. The leaves hung limp along the branches; the grass had lost its brilliancy, grain fell from the ears, and men suffocated as they bent over the wheat.

The labour of the harvest was, therefore, harder than usual for the reapers cutting the oats and wheat, and promised but small profit.

This was what Abbé Roubiaux was thinking as he went at noonday from Fonteneilles down to Pas-du-Loup. He was walking slowly upon the road, which rang like a hollow rock, his head bowed down, contrary to his custom. He lifted it up in passing before the avenue of the château, and saw Michel de Meximieu leaning on the white gate. The young man beckoned: "Come in and see me." He looked very calm. Nothing showed that he had just gone through a crisis, unless it were the pallor of his nostrils which were still dilated and the trembling of his fingers upon the wood he was grasping. All the energy of his race had revived in him, transformed, silent, and master in the domain of suffering.

To Abbé Roubiaux who asked: "How do you do?" he replied:

"Poorly."

But it was said with a tone of supreme indifference. And he added:

"I am waiting for the coming of the cattle driver, to speak to him about sending off some cattle. Farmer to the last, as you see. And you? I know what you are going to do."

"Alas!"

"Where do you begin?"

"With the hamlet of Pas-du-Loup! Five houses and not one Christian! I am hurrying, because it is the rest hour and the workmen are at home, or may be there."

Michel bowed to him with a smile.

"Good luck to the missionary! Monsieur l'Abbé, come and tell me, this evening, the result of your first day's begging. For my part I feel confident."

"Truly?"

"You see, Monsieur l'Abbé, we have in our bodies eight quarts of blood. Well, in the poorest blood of France, there is always one drop which believes."

They pressed each other's hand, and Abbé Roubiaux went hurrying down to take the little path near by, which led between the meadows.

The first house which he entered was that of Gilbert Cloquet. The workman, while mowing the day before, had been overcome by the heat. He had returned to the hamlet and was still lying weak upon his unmade bed. At the noise of the opening door, at the sudden entrance of the light and air, he sat up ashamed, and jumped out of bed upon the earth floor, buttoning in haste the collar of his shirt and slipping his feet into the sabots standing beside the bed.

"Why, it is the curé!" said he. "Excuse me! I did not expect your visit. I was nct thinking of you."

"I am very sorry to disturb you, Gilbert. But I have a reason for coming."

"That must be, Monsieur le Curé. I never saw your predecessor in my house until the day when he came to take away the body of my poor wife, to bury her. Will you sit down?"

"Thanks."

"Will you have a glass of wine? You are thirsty,

perhaps? I shall be glad to give it; but for me, I am unable to drink to-day."

"No. I have come about a very serious matter. I am going to see every one in the parish, and I have begun with Pas-du-Loup. Gilbert Cloquet, you know that the State does not pay us any more?"

"Yes, I know it, I have read that in the papers."

"Well, I have come to ask you, you and all the men of the parish: Will you give something to support the priests, myself and the others, or do you wish to give up religion? You are free, Gilbert. Answer me according to your conscience."

The abbé, standing, agitated and trembling in spite of himself, had recited the speech which he had prepared and which he was going to repeat the same way to the head of each family. It seemed to him that he had the whole country before him, considering and firm. What was it going to answer? He prayed. The village, prostrated by the heat, was silent. A tree-toad sang, hidden under the cask of wine. Gilbert, in shirt and pantaloons, his head bowed, considered the words which had just been spoken to him, as if it were a question of a bundle of bark whose weight he wished to judge of. He had the manner he bore on the great days of debate, the face of a judge, his jaw drooping, his eyelids half closed and his eyebrows knit together. What memories passed through his mind? What reasons influenced him? All remained mysterious. He told only one thing, the least important, doubtless, of those that he

had weighed in his mind; he held up his head, his blue eyes were serene.

"Monsieur le Curé, I make little use of religion; but it does not suit me to have none at all. I want to be buried in holy ground, like my dead."

The abbé, who meant to say thank you, was so troubled that he did not realize that he only continued aloud the prayer begun in his mind: "*Sancta Maria, mater Dei*—" Neither did the workman notice it. He had turned away and was fumbling under his bolster and he drew from beneath it an old purse with copper mountings; then, placing his offering in the hand of Abbé Roubiaux, he said:

"I am no longer rich, I cannot give much. You must not hold it against me. My poor Marie is going to be sold out on Sunday."

The abbé, very pale, took in his fingers the two-franc piece, and, lifting it up he traced in the air the sign of the cross:

"*Benedicat vos!*" said he. "Thanks, Gilbert. God will not abandon you."

"I have need of Him," answered the man.

Perhaps he would have said more. But the abbé withdrew, and, crossing the forest road, entered the house of Ravoux, where, in the lower room five children with the father and mother had just eaten dinner. The salad bowl, full of the remains of curdled milk and bread, still stood between them on the table. Ravoux rose up, frowned, and, like Gilbert, looked straight at the priest. But between them rose up all the reading

which the workman had done. The abbé timidly began to repeat his request.

"No, Monsieur," interrupted Ravoux; "it is useless. You know very well that I do not belong to your party."

"But I am not of any party, no more than God," said the abbé.

"Enough. I mean what I say. I do not give for the mitre."

Abbé Roubiaux raised his hand above the astonished children for the second time.

"*Benedicat vos!*"

He went out, bowing. Ravoux followed him. He was moved, even touched. His black and curly beard twitched.

"When you have no more bread at home," said the workman to the retreating priest, "I will not refuse it to you. What I refuse is the cause, it is not you."

The abbé made a motion with his head, without turning, while Ravoux drove back into the room the children and their mother, whose heads, one above the other, filled the doorway.

"A queer fellow, our curé!" said he, laughing. "He believes in his religion!"

The abbé continued his collection. He went into the house of the neighbour of Cloquet and the fat Mère Justamond asked him:

"Can I give you something without telling my husband? He is not home."

"No, on the contrary, you must ask him, that he may have his share of the credit."

"Then I can't do it."

"Adieu, Mère Justamond!"

Abbé Roubiaux turned on his heels, but he had not taken four steps toward the house of Père Dixneuf, before the good woman ran breathlessly after him:

"Here, Monsieur le Curé, take this just the same." And she gave him ten sous. She had six children.

Père Dixneuf, the old Zouave, attacked with hemiplegy, with his right hand contracted, his neck twisted and his eyes dull and moist, was seated in a straw arm-chair before his window.

"It would be more to the point for me to beg from you! After all, I never go to the church!"

Then, lifting himself up on the pillow which supported his head:

"Take, however, all the same, the sous which are on the chimney piece, it is all that I have. And then leave me alone. Good-by!"

The abbé took two of them, and left the rest.

The wife of Juste Lappe, quite on the edge of the woods, a little woman, very faithful, determined, active, and almost pretty still, who went out for a day's work as often as her husband, having seen the whole hamlet in a flutter of excitement, already knew the reason for the curé's visit. She did not wait for his request, but taking the abbé aside, to the shelter of the corner of the house, she said:

"Tell me, Monsieur le Curé, did Ravoux give you anything?"

"No."

"Or Gilbert?"

"I began with him, and he gave something."

"Very well, then I will give, too; Lappe is always on Cloquet's side in arguments."

As he left the forest, the abbé talked aloud to himself: "It is not so bad; I would hardly have believed; can Pas-du-Loup be the best hamlet of the parish? How can that be? Anyway, I have made a beginning. Now, to the open fields, Roubiaux!"

He hurried out of the road, across a meadow, to the farm of Épine, where Cloquet's daughter disdainfully refused to give, and crossing the road of Fonteneilles, he entered the wheat field of one of the large farms of the parish. On account of the slopes in the shape of shelving ridges, which formed the field, it was difficult to reap with the machine. They were harvesting with the scythe. The ears pressed one against the other, forming at three feet above the ground a covering, thicker, more sensitive and changeable than the fur of an animal, a cover of moving grain, from which there already came the odor of bread; by the blades, all along the stalks, the heat had collected, scorching the straw and drying the flour. And the men had now entered in this furnace to reap. The abbé sought his flock. Three of them were there, bent over; the napes of their necks burning; their arms, with the scythes which they held, describing a semicircle; their bodies following the movement with less freedom, their feet stepping forward after every two strokes of the scythe and swayings of the body. One saw these harvesters from the rear. The one who began first

was already half-way up the hill; in the second rank, fifty yards behind, his brother followed him, and nearly at the bottom of the field, quite near to the abbé, the servant, a bad youngster of sixteen years, was nicking the blade of his scythe on the stones. On seeing the abbé get over the tree branches the boy laughed, shrugged his shoulders and began again to mow. He had often heard about curés, and never anything good. His cheeks were red, but what a wretched physique, and what morbid inheritance showed in the pallid tint of his neck, in the already flaccid and dented gums of his half-open mouth, in that glimmer of bestial passion in his eyes. What death, poorly disguised as youth, showed itself under this mask!

"My boy," said the abbé, "I meet you for the first time. Where are you from?"

"From Allier."

"Have you made your first communion?"

"Not much."

The contraction of death was around his poor mouth, blue with fatigue and helpless exhaustion. The boy had placed his scythe upright in the stubble. He seemed dwarfed by its side.

"Have you ever been baptized?"

"I believe so, because I was there at the baptism of my sisters."

The abbé repeated his speech, to explain his visit. And the laugh died away.

"If I ask money from you, it is not for the money, my boy, it is most of all for your little unknown soul. I was born like you on a farm.

I have worked, too, as you are doing. But I have left what I loved, my mother, my relatives, and my neighbours, in order to love you all better. Tell me, even if you know nothing about the good God, you do not want to be one of his enemies?"

The sun, which had long before drunk up the reserves of water from the earth, was drinking now the sap of the grass and of the woods, and it was that which made the white clouds large as a hand, which floated very high, like birds which have their nest in the grass and which hover over it. The cassock of the abbé was wet with perspiration and clung to his body. The men who were in advance, in the first open cuttings, turned their heads while still mowing to see what the servant was doing. The child raised his eyes to those of the abbé, and some tenderness fell on his waste soul. He passed his elbow over his damp forehead, tapped upon the pocket of his pantaloons, and said making sport of himself, but with true youth in his glance and feeling in his voice:

"I have nothing there, but I would like to do it to give you pleasure. If you like, I will come on Sunday to bring you my sous."

Over the swaths of cut wheat, through the paths between them, the abbé made his way up toward the second man, and behind him, he heard the grating noise of the scythe of the boy who had begun work again. When he had approached near to the reaper of wheat, the abbé saluted with his hand, and was going to speak, when the

man said gravely, having guessed or heard the dialogue from below:

"Yes, put down my name. I am a Catholic, as you know well; I have a mass said every year, on the day on which my father died."

"And your brother?"

"I do not know. Go and ask him."

The abbé went up a little farther toward the left, to the edge of the hedge. He looked at the churlish man, who was the elder and the real head of the farm, a colossus, who cut with one stroke of the blade a swath as wide as a great cart wheel. He spoke to him when still a little behind him and the man without rising, without turning around, said dryly:

"No!"

"You are not willing?"

"No!"

The abbé waited behind, his hat in his hand, slowly following the man who was swinging the scythe.

"In the name of those who have mowed here before you," said he, "and who are dead!"

The two men were walking upon the same stubble, they heard each other's tread.

"In the name of your children who, without God, will not have the full joy of their life!"

Both were brushing with their breasts the same ears of grain about to fall.

"In the name of your uncared-for soul, which I want to save!"

The peasant made no answer. There was anger in the noise of his scythe cutting the ears of grain.

Besides, they were close by the ridge of the field, the top of the red wave, and the man was going to go down the other slope of the wheat field. When the abbé saw that, he left the reaper, and he turned his steps toward other fields and other hearts.

At eight o'clock in the evening he had not appeared at the château of Fonteneilles. Neither did he come on Friday. It was not until Saturday evening he came down through the avenue of beech trees, an Abbé Roubiaux who did not at all resemble the former one. He seemed to have grown thin, his cassock was white with dust; he limped as he walked and he leaned heavily upon his staff; but the little dark countenance, unmindful of the road, beaming with joy and dreaming, was surely listening to the canticle of the new life. The priest came through the summer twilight, which is as clear as the day, and softer.

"Well! And the collection?" cried Michel, crossing the court. "Is it finished?"

They met each other under the last beech of the great avenue.

"I am worn out," said the abbé, "but I have hope! You were right! Do you know how many families have refused me, Monsieur Michel? Six! All the others have given!"

"It is a marvel, indeed!"

"And yet another is that I have made myself known to them. I am more truly their priest. We are less afraid of each other, they and I. Ah! Monsieur Michel, if you could have heard what different forms of faith! What simplicity! Often

what poorness of spirit! But what mysteries of the heart showed in it all!"

He brought the proofs. They were the replies gathered in the fields and in the farms. He lived in them still. He was agitated, troubled, saddened, amused by them. He told them with all the gestures and the accents. He told those of the inhabitants of Pas-du-Loup, and those of the reapers, with their fears, and their putting off for a week hence, and the secret meetings, and their words so full of ignorance: "Monsieur le Curé, I am for religion, because it helps trade! What would become of the market towns if there were no Sunday? For myself, I am not afraid; I am a Catholic and when I can go to mass, I go. Write down the name of my father, if it is possible, he would have been glad to have his name there. I will give for him."

"And those who have refused me," continued the abbé, "have nearly all of them wished to explain the reason; they have made excuses for themselves; one of them had a brother who was a lock-keeper, and if he should give for the church, he would be afraid of what would happen to his brother; another said to me: 'I am an official.' And his duties consisted in taking care of a child for the State Charity. I have scarcely met anything of what I dreaded so much. Ah! Monsieur Michel, there are their replies. They are poor like themselves! They do not know, they fear, they tremble; but all these indifferent ones, having been put in a position where they could deny their faith, have refused to. How much

better I am going to love them hereafter. Until now, what have they lived on? What supply of grace? On their baptism and on the *Ave Maria* of their ancestors. But see! They have now done an act of personal faith. And I, I am going to devote myself, to think and to pray so much that they will return altogether. *Vive* Fonteneilles, Monsieur Michel!"

"*Vive* Fonteneilles! I am as happy as you, Monsieur le Curé, and with a joy which exceeds both of our hopes."

"I have not dined, I have not appeared at the church since this morning. Adieu!"

"Thanks!"

Abbé Roubiaux went on, up toward the hamlet. The shadows began to fall. He felt the puffs of hot wind pass around him which the night was carrying over the country, each breath having its music, its perfume, and its language; wind of the withered alfalfa, breath of the stubble, breath of the meadows, of the forests and of the ponds of Vaux. The abbé murmured: "I shall be a spirit like you enveloping them, calming them, penetrating them with the invisible life. I will go to all of them. I will be their priest, always ready, at all times, Hallelujah!"

Upon the road a shadow saluted him.

"Good-evening, Grollier! Where are you going?"

"To seek my night's rest."

"Do you wish to sleep at my house?"

The wanderer, whose full game bag, covered by his mantle, rounded out below like a tent, lifted up his bushy beard and his sneering eyes.

"Ah, ah! What would Philomène say? Grollier at the curé's, in a bed? The whole parish would laugh at it, to-morrow. Thanks, Monsieur le Curé, I have an errand to do, I too."

He continued on his way. The darkness soon swallowed him up, together with the hedges, the borders of grass, and even the earthy embankment of the road. By the forest path he went down toward Pas-du-Loup; the forest received him, concealed him and gave to him another semblance, as it does to the wild beasts who are at home under its branches. Jogging along, unseen, he glided to the door of Gilbert Cloquet. The door was barred on the inside. The hamlet slept; the only sound was the cry of a child whose mother was quieting it, humming a lullaby. Grollier made the tour of the house, and pushed open the hurdle of the garden in the rear. There he made out, seated upon the trunk of a tree which was rotting along the side of the wall, the figure of a man, who was either thinking or sleeping, with his head in his hands. He whistled like a waking bird. The shadow started up.

"Are you looking for a blow from a pitchfork, you tramp?"

The deep voice of Gilbert rang out in the garden, but did not stop Grollier who, with a movement of his shoulder, freed himself from his cloak and then lifted up the plump game bag which he carried from his shoulder belt.

"Don't be frightened, old fellow; it is I, Grollier, who have come to make you a visit."

"I would rather see you another time, Grollier; to-night I am in trouble."

"Precisely; I have something to say to you about your trouble."

Grollier, while Gilbert was seating himself again upon the trunk of the tree, remained standing, leaning upon his stick.

"Your daughter, at whose house to-morrow the notary will make the sale."

"I shall not be there! Do not speak to me of her, and if she has given you a message for me, do not give it! Leave me; I have trouble enough! My daughter, my friends, my work, my wife who is dead, everything."

"Yes, such is life, is it not; it is like the sea which I saw when I was little; they say that the deeper one goes into it, the saltier it is. I cannot cure you, Cloquet, but I know you to be an honest man."

"Well, and what good does that do me?"

"It keeps you from letting those who depend on you take what belongs to other people."

Gilbert sprang up and seized the tramp's arm.

"Do not dare to say that! I lose all of my money, in the sale of my daughter. I lose my pension and my rest. What more do you want me to give?"

"Let go of me, and listen! When the bailiff came to Épine, the last of May, you think, perhaps, that he noted down all the cattle of Lureux?"

"Certainly he did."

"You are mistaken."

"How?"

"He could not put down on his paper what was in the forest!"

"Hidden?"

"*Parbleu*, everybody in Fonteneilles knew it except you!"

"Thieves! My children, thieves! You are joking, Grollier! But I'll stop your wanting to do that."

"I am joking so little that you have only to go to-night to the farm of Épine and open the stable door: and you will see that there are three cows less; in the sheep-fold, four sheep less, in the stall, a mare the less and the best one."

"And where are these animals?"

Grollier wagged his head to the right and to the left, to signify that they were here and there in the country.

"They are hidden away until the sale is over. Then they will sell them to their friends. But the creditors will know nothing about it, nor the notary, nor the bailiff. And your son-in-law will still have some money with which to amuse himself, Gilbert!"

The workman shook the arm of the tramp roughly.

"Do not fool me, Grollier, or I will hunt you out in the woods and settle your account. My daughter a thief! Cattle hidden away! Tell me the names of the accomplices who have hidden the beasts! Tell me, Grollier, and I will go!"

Grollier coolly, softly, for the night was mild and he must not be overheard by the neighbours, repeated the names of the farms or of the persons.

Then he threw his coat over his back and hung the game bag on his shoulder.

"I have my holes in the forest; adieu, Gilbert. I have done you this service because you are an honest man. When I shall need bread, will you give me some?"

Gilbert had already gone into the house. Groping about, he took a cudgel of sorb wood, and locked the closet where he kept his money. When he came out the garden was deserted. A warm haze lay over the vegetables, the pear trees, bee hives, and the forest around. The moon would soon rise, for the baying of a stray dog could be heard, very far off. Like a man who has lost his reason, he began to run, jumping over the fences made of dead branches, walking in the soft places of the meadows, and twirling his stick of dry sorb wood. He ran in the direction of Épine.

Soon the house loomed up, half-way up the hill, in the fog already whitened by the invisible moon, the house where the sale would take place on the morrow. Gilbert listened. The man and his wife must be sleeping. He drew nearer, and placed his ear against the lower shutters. Then, walking with precaution, he opened the door of the stable, that of the barn, that of the sheep-fold and that of the pig-sty."

Then, sure of the truth, he cried out in the night, with all his might, turned toward the house:

"Thieves! Thieves!"

And he set off on a run climbing the shelving ridges of land above Épine.

IX.

THE SALE AT LUREUX'S.

THE day after the bailiff had attached his belongings at the farm of Épine, Lureux had gone to the notary. The latter was used to stormy visits from pursued debtors. He listened with resignation to their protestations and with a practised hand he seized the first chance to interrupt and to end the affair.

"You are right not to wish to remain under the stigma of an execution. It is not pleasant to see one's name in notices and in the papers, and always coupled with that word. Take my advice, change the execution into a voluntary sale; have the look, at least, of only being a farmer in difficulties who is disposing voluntarily of his property."

"But I should ask for nothing better. How can it be done?"

"Why, it is very simple. You give power to your landlord to sell all your furniture and cattle; I will draw up the little document, and a few days later, at a date which we will fix by common consent, I will proceed to the sale, myself. Do you agree to that?"

This advice was good for everybody and was always followed.

On Sunday, July 22d, about one o'clock, the notary, who was getting on in years, but who was brisk and ruddy still, arrived in the court of the farm in his cart, with his clerk carrying his morocco portfolio. The auctioneer had preceded them, an old man, thin and pale, broad-chested, dressed in black in deference to the law of which he was so often the neighbour, and who enjoyed throughout the country of Corbigny a sound reputation on account of his facetious humour, his skill in making the bidding go up, and especially for his voice, which was nasal and dominating, like an oboe. These three personages, as soon as the cart was unharnessed, arranged the stage for the act which they had so many times played together.

Already the ploughs, harrows, drills, the two muck carts, the jaunting cart, the mill for winnowing grain, laid out in a line from the wells and parallel to the house, formed a barrier prolonged on the other side of the well by an iron bed and a wooden one placed on the ground of the court. In front, and along the walls of the farm, stood an old white mare, fastened to an iron buckle, with her head in the shadow and her body in the sun, who dozed on three feet, only moving her tail to keep the flies away from her shining crupper. Farther on was the long table behind which the auctioneer would stand, the table which had stood in the big room of the farm house, but was now encumbered with the things to be sold first: a gilt clock, andirons, kitchen utensils, sheets, towels, shirts, handkerchiefs, piles of plates

and covered metal dishes. Still farther on, by the steps in front of the entrance to Épine, they had placed a chair for the clerk and a toilet table—that of Marie Lureux—with inkstand, pen, memorandum book and the book of stamped paper, open at the first page.

"At half-past one we shall begin the sale!" said the notary, who was walking up and down in the court, talking with some clients.

The crowd was not yet large, but it increased gradually. Through the meadows below, through the gaps of the fields above, by the little semicircular road which went down toward Laché and began at the north of the court, men walking slowly, kept coming discreetly, to look on, with the idea of buying anything that should go cheaply. They came more readily after the report had been spread abroad that the two Lureux's themselves would keep in the back room of the farm house, and that there would be no reproaches to be feared from them. A few women had slipped in among the crowd, and, forming a semicircle among the men who were standing up, sat down upon the handles of the ploughs and on the well curb.

As soon as the town clock struck the half hour, the notary threw away the cigarette which he was smoking, approached the sorry-looking clerk who was seated and who arose out of deference, and, making a signal to the assembled men to be silent, he said with a loud voice, his eyes looking down on the book of stamped paper:

"The year 1906, Sunday, July 22, at one

o'clock in the afternoon, at the request of Monsieur Étienne Lureux, farmer at the place called Épine, situated in the commune of Fonteneilles, there is about to take place the sale of the furniture, movable property, and cattle belonging to said Lureux and his wife."

After the reading of this preamble, he interrupted himself, and changing his tone and looking at his audience, said:

"The usual conditions are understood: ten per cent. in addition to the price of the sale; three months' credit for solvent people; everybody, however, may pay cash."

Then, seeing that they found that amusing, he added:

"Auctioneer, to your guns!"

A few laughs broke out in the burning air. The men were red with heat. The women sought the short shade of the well. The auctioneer took up in both hands the clock, ornamented with two doves in gilded brass.

"Fifteen francs for the clock, ladies!"

It was the clock which Gilbert Cloquet had bought for his daughter, a fortnight before the wedding, and which he had carried home himself from Corbigny, holding it on his knees, protecting it with his arms, like a reliquary, while his future son-in-law drove the cart at a great pace.

"Fifteen francs fifty, sixteen, sixteen fifty——"

Marie Lureux's black braids appeared behind the curtains of the window, quite near. Scarcely any one noticed her. The notary called out: "Gone!" and the clock was carried off.

One after the other the things piled up on the long table were sold and then others which replaced them were sold in their turn. In spite of the auctioneer's efforts the bids were slow.

The bidding became a little more animated toward three o'clock, when the notary announced that they would proceed to the sale of the horses, cattle, and sheep. Then a young village lad, amused by his part of the work, went to the white mare, unfastened her halter, and made the animal turn around so as to show her off to the public. Two hundred men and women of Fonteneilles and of the neighbouring village were present by this time. The farming implements had been carried off and laid here and there along the hedges. The people had crowded around the table. Murmurs rose and laughter.

"Let us look at her teeth," demanded a farmer.

"She is old enough," said another.

"That is why she is white," said a third. "When Lureux used to drive her, it seems to me that she had a coat of another colour."

"One hundred and fifty francs," interrupted the auctioneer.

He was leaning forward, his hands resting on the top of the table, his eyes screwed up, already seeking the silent bids in the eyes of his nearest neighbours, when a mocking voice from the rear of the court, at the entrance of the road toward Laché cried out:

"Lureux! Show yourself, man, now is the time!"

"That's Grollier's voice," said the notary.

All the people had turned around.

"Lureux!" called Grollier again. "Is not that your black mare coming back? Look!"

And, in fact, a fine animal, with a coat of glossy black, had just appeared at the bottom of the slope, at the hollow place where the road turns. She came slowly up, apparently all alone, between the two thin hedges, going toward the familiar stable.

"Lureux! There come three cows now."

Three white cows followed the mare, browsing on the bramble shoots.

"Here are your sheep! They are all coming back. They are all coming home to Épine."

A clamour rose from the crowd and rolled toward the forest. The women's voices dominated.

"Cloquet! Gilbert Cloquet! It is he who is driving them."

The tumult increased. Men who were seated arose: those who were chatting at the extremities of the court hurried toward the opening of the road. The whole mass of humanity, swift or slow, urged on by curiosity, flowed toward the same side and formed two groups, prolonging to the middle of the court the two hedges of the road. And down this path with its living, moving borders, bristling with arms and uplifted canes and hats waved in salute, passed the black mare, her head high, frightened, then the white cows and then the sheep, and then Cloquet, towering above the curious crowd, pale with fatigue and emotion, leaning as he walked, upon his wooden

staff. He was looking straight toward the house, and answered no one. Lureux appeared on the threshold of the farm house. He had on his best clothes, the ones which he did not want to have taken from him. Behind him, haggard and trembling, his wife was speaking to him and trying to hold him back. But he would not listen. He had a fine bearing, this tiller of the soil, trained by strikes to the attitudes and words of tragedy. With his soft felt hat lifted up, his young, energetic face in the full light, his moustache curled upward, his expression disdainful and his body erect, he cried out:

"Drive the animals back, comrades. Help me to chase them from the court! They are not a part of the sale!"

With a twist of his body he escaped from Marie and threw himself in the midst of the moving groups. His friends did not respond, because only the interest of one person was at stake. Several even tried to stop Lureux. "He wants to fight Cloquet! Stop him!" He slipped through their outstretched hands and ran after the black mare to drive her back to the road. But the frightened animals ran in all directions, each one opening a path through the court which was like a noisy fair ground. Women got out of the way, shrieking. In the midst of the hubbub and of the surging mass of humanity, a single man remained motionless and silent. The storm raged around him. It was Cloquet, his two hands clasped on his stick. Lureux giving up the pursuit of his cows and his black mare, turned short, and

flung himself upon him. He shook his fists in his face.

"*Canaille!* You have betrayed your daughter!"

"Down with your fists!" cried Gilbert, whose arm cut the air like a sabre and made Lureux recoil.

"Don't hit so hard!"

"Then speak more civilly; I am betraying no one; I am bringing back the animals because they belong to the sale; I have chased all night after them; I have them all; they return to pay your debts."

He looked at the men, collected in an instant about him, eager, curious, scoffing or anxious, according to their humour. Gilbert, so big and calm, kept them silent.

"There is not one of you here who blames me. If there be one, let him say so!"

A half second of silence and Lureux understood that he was not supported. He let fall his fists, which he was holding up, ready to strike. He shrugged his shoulders and made a pretence of laughing.

"This is only my business, I suppose?"

"Not at all; it is also mine; I will not have it said that my daughter is a thief."

"You fool! It was she who led the heifer to the *Maison Grise.*"

"You lie, Lureux!"

"She who begged the miller of little Maré to take care of the black mare. We did everything together. Are you angry because we have saved a little of our property?"

"Yes, Lureux, I am angry because it is not just."

"So much the worse for justice. The cattle will not be sold; no one has any right to sell them. Where is the notary?"

In turning round, Lureux saw the notary pushing his way with difficulty through the crowd of men.

"What does this mean, Lureux? Is it true that these animals belong to you?"

"They belong to me or to somebody else; that makes no difference; they shall not be sold. I won't allow it."

"You are not the first who has played me this trick, Lureux. You hid them; you put them in other farms."

"Pardon, Monsieur le Notaire, the whole question depends on whether the bailiff marked them down in the seizure. You can read the inventory; they are not there. I will not allow the sale!"

He had recovered his confidence. He eyed the notary from head to foot. He listened with growing pleasure to the murmurs around him. "He is right—if the bailiff has not made a list of them. That is the law. One must do as the law says. So much the worse for those who trusted in him." But his pleasure was brief. The notary, rising on tiptoe, counted the animals tied here and there around the court.

"Take the black mare to the stable! Lead the three cows and the sheep to the barn! And quickly," he cried. "You have forgotten only

one thing, Lureux. Have you, yes or no, signed the deed of acceptance of the seizure?"

"Certainly, I have signed it."

"Very well, then! In it you give me the power to sell all of your furniture and live stock, all. Do your hear? Gentlemen, I resume the sale. Follow me!"

He looked for Gilbert Cloquet and could not find him.

Gilbert, having said what had to be said, had withdrawn from the excited throng. He had gone to the deserted end of the court, and as he reached the corner of the house where the path goes down toward the forest, he stood, his whole heart turned to the threshold of the house where Marie was crying, her forehead bowed against the lintel of the door and hidden in her arm. She had seen her father and had not run to him. He called to her in a low tone, not too loud, so that no one would hear him.

"Marie! Marie! I have given you everything, and you, you steal from those who trust you! Marie, I am penniless and you rob me besides of half my honour! Marie, I am speaking to you! I am telling you these things, and you do not answer me!"

She kept on sobbing. The laughing, chatting crowd came, following the notary. Friends drew near and enemies were coming.

Gilbert heard a voice which was not that of Marie calling him. He went away, walking backward down the slope of the court to the place where the path goes through the hedge.

He saw the auctioneer and the clerk take their places again behind the table. Then he saw the people stand aside and Lureux run through the midst of them, enter the house, and come out again holding in one hand a little linen portmanteau, and with the other dragging Marie, who was trying to hide herself behind him. "Adieu! Let me pass!" cried Lureux. "You have all betrayed me! I am going away never to return!" And the black felt hat of Étienne and the gay-flowered bonnet which Marie wore passed a little above the crowd in the direction of Laché, disappeared and were lost to sight.

Behind the hedge Gilbert held up his arms.

"Marie!" he cried. "My poor Marie, you, too, have not enough to live on! And yet it is I who brought you up!"

Then correcting himself, he added:

"A little—as I was able to."

And he fled toward Pas-du-Loup, pursued by the voice of the auctioneer, growing fainter, who was saying:

"A fine white heifer for sale. The fine, white heifer brought back by an honest man!"

The forest swallowed him up.

Two days later, as he was returning from work on a farm of Crux-la-Ville, in the twilight, in the path in the woods which the Vorroux crosses and which turns toward Fonteneilles he saw Michel de Meximieu. The young man was walking slowly and in the same direction. He stopped sometimes to listen or to breathe better. Gilbert could have avoided him, as he had avoided so

many people of Fonteneilles, since the day when the bailiff had come to Épine. Shame made him uncivil. But this time he quickened his steps, and, before overtaking him, he coughed to announce his presence. Michel did not turn round, and walked on, but he reached out his arm at the moment when the workman passed by him, and he put his hand affectionately upon Gilbert's shoulder, so that the latter did not have to find a pretext for stopping or for beginning to talk. He had been recognized without being seen; he was pitied.

"It was well done—what you did on Sunday, Gilbert!"

"It was sad, also, Monsieur Michel."

They continued walking near each other in the path where there was still a gleam of light which shone on their faces, and on the bushes and the grass. Michel had not withdrawn his hand from the workman's shoulder. The growing darkness toned and blended their figures together in the same way that it confused in brotherhood stones, trees, hills, and the houses of men.

"Do you know what I often say to myself when I think of you, Gilbert, and of a few others in the country, the best men, those who are like you?"

"Why, no. I did not even know that you thought of me."

"I say to myself that you have a spirit above your trade."

"Sometimes, yes, that might be so."

"That you put something higher than your own interest. That is what is good, and what

touches me, and draws me so close to you, it is clear, too, that you do not see how they have stolen the truth from you, from you and from millions of others; but you would love it if you could see it, I am sure of that."

"What truth, Monsieur Michel?"

"That which makes you my equal, and gives you the power to be more."

They were silent, one because he felt that it would be useless to say more, the other because subjects of this kind were not familiar to him, and because he did not find the words to reply. But Gilbert understood that this rich man had a fraternal soul, a kind of devoted and peculiar tenderness, which was not based upon any apparent solidarity, but upon the mysterious things which each one guards for himself, "in his holy of holies."

The first star had risen above a poplar tree which seemed to touch it with its slim, straight point. The two men gazed at it, and somewhere in space their souls must have greeted each other. They walked slowly, a dreamy softness floated in the descending night.

"You have always been very fair with me, Monsieur Michel. I would like to speak to you—I want one thing."

"What, my friend?"

"To go away. After what has happened, I cannot live here any more. I no longer dare look people in the face. I imagine that they are all thinking of Marie and Lureux when they meet me. You are the only one left who thinks of me. I want to go away."

"What will you do away from here?"

"What I do here."

"And where do you want to go?"

"To take your cattle, if you sell any, in September. I will stay wherever they go."

Michel replied after a moment's thought:

"That might be done, Gilbert; I have six large old oxen, which would do well for the sugar refiners. If I decide to sell them at the September fair, I will send you word."

He held out his hand to the workman, and they said nothing more. But they thought of each other when each had taken his own path through the woods which had become quite black, and over which a long band of red sky weighed like an iron bar left by the men at the end of the day's work, to cool and to turn brown upon the anvil.

They saw each other again several times during the month of August. Chance threw them together at the corner of a thicket or on the road of Fonteneilles, or in the fields near the château. But where before they had simply greeted each other and passed on, now they took pleasure in talking together. And it was only Gilbert who was surprised by it. When he had talked for a quarter of an hour with Michel de Meximieu, he thought all the rest of the day, and often for several days, of what they had talked about, and he was like a man who comes back from a voyage.

About the middle of the month, as they were talking at the corner of the oat stubble and the meadow of Fonteneilles and some partridges were drumming, Michel said:

"The fashion is now to flatter the workman and to rail at the noble. The truth, Cloquet, is that we both of us have greatly deteriorated. We are sick with the same diseases; indolence and pride. All hatred springs from them. Yet when he has not been spoiled either by autos or by hunting, there is no proprietor so well fitted as a noble to act in concert with a labourer. We belong to the old stock, you and I. And that is one of the reasons of our friendship."

Gilbert did not venture to reply, because he had little experience outside of Fonteneilles; but in the depth of his heart he recognized that it was true for Michel and for himself. And he loved this man who spoke freely of all things.

Another time, at the beginning of September, he even dared to ask:

"In spite of all this you are against the unions, Monsieur Michel? I understand that; they do not belong to your world, but they belong to mine. Upon that point we shall never agree."

"You are mistaken!"

Michel laughed. He felt better that day. The air had found the woods full of life and was spreading it abroad. The thin lips of the invalid drank it in, and his eyes were lighted by the reflection of the warm earth, brown eyes filled with the gold light of youth. He never lied, nor did he calculate; he let his ardent soul be seen.

"You are mistaken, Gilbert. What makes me angry, what fills me with sorrow and pity, is the ideal of impossible iniquity which they thrust on you, and so paltry an idea that not one of the

wood-cutters of France in the past, would have been satisfied with it; your wings are clipped by your chiefs like those of barn-yard fowls; they give you appetites in place of justice, hatred in place of love. But, listen to me! All could be changed. If some day the work is baptized, if there is a benediction on this rising sea, Gilbert, living or dead, I shall be with you, I shall applaud, I shall believe in a better earth, that is, a nobler one, in a new chivalry, and in the return of the saints to a happy people. As truly as to-day is bright, that is what I hope for. Adieu, my old Cloquet. I would like to have said many other things to you. I shall miss not being able to talk to you."

"I also, Monsieur Michel."

Gilbert watched the young man go away, following him with his eyes as long as he could. His heart was full of those regrets which do not wait for the good-by in order to make us suffer. He thought: "I have a friend, but as well say I had one, since I am going to leave him."

Gilbert Cloquet was not surprised, therefore, when he saw the guard of Fonteneilles coming to his house, the evening before the fair of Corbigny, which takes place on the second Tuesday of the month.

"Cloquet," said Renard, "Monsieur le Comte sends me to say to you that to-morrow he will sell his six great oxen. If you wish to take them to the fair, you must start to-night."

The workman was cutting vetch in a field quite near the hamlet. He shook his sabots, which

were covered with mud, for it had rained all the morning, then he passed his hand through his beard to give himself time to reflect, and he said:

"I am ready."

"Monsieur le Comte bade me to say to you besides, that merchants from the coast of Belgium, from the North, from Pas-de-Calais—"

"Call them the Picards, then, it is their name!"

"Well, then! Picards will be numerous at Corbigny. There are chances that our cattle may be bought for the beets of Picardy."

"And then I shall make the journey with them, shall I not?"

"You are not obliged to."

"No, if any one forced me to, I would not go. Tell me, Renard; this is not to say anything against you, but why did not Monsieur Michel come to speak with me himself? We are friends."

"He is ill, and in bed. Things are not going well. *Au revoir*, Gilbert. Good luck with the Picards!"

Gilbert grew very sad. He said good-by to the guard who went back to the château. Then he took a handful of grass, wiped the blade of his scythe carefully, and, having looked at the sun, which marked five o'clock in the evening upon the dial of the Summer sky, he left the field to go and close his house.

Of all the neighbours of Pas-du-Loup, he notified only Mère Justamond. When he had put everything in order and as he wished it to be during his absence, he dressed himself in clean clothes, clipped the end of his blond beard, made

a bundle of clothes to carry with him, and then stretched himself out on his bed and slept a little. Before daybreak he rapped on the window pane of the Justamonds' house. It was all arranged. The good woman half opened the window and drew back at the same time, on account of the cold air from the forest, which came in.

"Mère Justamond, here is the key of my house; keep it until I come back."

"Will that be soon?"

"I hope not; I am sick at heart."

"Cure it, my poor Cloquet. But that is not easy when the sickness comes from children. I will bear everything in mind, to open the room when it is fine, to watch the bees, to dig the potatoes, of which I will give you an account."

"There is still one thing," said Gilbert.

"What, then? How chilly it is for you to start!"

"I will let you know my address; you will write me the news of Fonteneilles and especially the news of Monsieur Michel."

The good woman leaned her big jovial face out of the window and Gilbert saw, in the gray light of dawn, that her eyes were full of pity.

"For me, I am not learned enough," said she, "but my son Etienne and my daughter know how to write well. If there is any news from Fonteneilles, they will write it to you. It makes me feel badly to see you go, Gilbert, by being neighbours so long we have become like relatives. Adieu."

"Adieu."

Half an hour later the six finest oxen from the stable of the château, six great, white, sharp-horned oxen, yoked two by two, were walking with their work-day pace along the road of Corbigny. And upon the left at the head of the first pair, Gilbert Cloquet carried the goad stick.

X.

THE FARM OF PAIN-FENDU.

"All right, Cloquet! you will have your board and you will have fifty francs a month, like the others. Your oxen are not shod?"

"No, Monsieur; with us oxen are not shod any more than sheep."

"Take them to-morrow morning, then, to the blacksmith's shop. That is all."

The man who thus finished his first conversation with Gilbert Cloquet in a small office, papered with green and black paper, had the stubborn expression, the abrupt speech, the square-cut beard and the permanent glasses of those who have devoted themselves to the study of mathematics. He was Monsieur Walmery, the young owner of the large farm of Pain-Fendu, a graduate of the school of agriculture, son of a former magistrate from the North, who had kept him from following a liberal profession. Monsieur Walmery accompanied the new drover to the end of the corridor which separated the office from the servants' dining-room which opened on the court. There he called out:

"Jude, these are the oxen from Nièvre; have them tethered in the third cow-shed."

He reëntered the house and went to the end of

the hall where the pale light cut in slanting lines the faded wall paper, and for some moments after, one could see his yellow leggings as he talked with a maid-servant. Gilbert Cloquet had rejoined in the court his six Nivernais oxen, still yoked two by two. He had picked up his goad, cut from a piece of holly wood at Fonteneilles, and, with his arm resting over the neck of Montagne and Rossigneau, he waited, his hat on the back of his head, his tawny beard blown by the wind, for the foreman of the farm, Jude Heilman, who was washing his hands in a trough at the rear of the big court below. The foreman, who was doubled over, straightened himself up, shook his naked arms and came forward pulling down the wristbands of his shirt. His height, his easy swinging walk, his youth, the steadfast gaze of his gray eyes which were the colour of the North Sea, and which began from afar off to examine the new drover, impressed Gilbert. This giant in trousers and shirt had a small, highly coloured face, and the thin curled-up, straw-coloured moustache of a non-commissioned officer.

"You are Gilbert?" said he. "A little too old to travel!"

"I might answer that you are a little too young to command, and I should probably be no nearer right than you are. You will judge me by my work."

"That's all right. Don't talk. Go and unyoke your beasts. What kind of an ornament is that behind the yoke? That's a queer fashion!"

He pointed to the vermilion handle which the

farmers of Nièvre add to the yoke of their oxen as an ornament.

"That is the way our people mark fine pairs of oxen. We are rather vain at Fonteneilles. And we have reason to be!"

With a light touch of his goad on the muzzle of Rossigneau, he turned the first pair of oxen around in their place.

"Who ever saw the like!" he grumbled, "not a compliment for animals like mine! Do they even have oxen, these Picards?"

The six oxen began walking, with the air of a procession, and he added:

"Fine oxen they are here, in Picardy! The best of them would only do for the *crêche de Noël!*"

These two opinions were called forth by the comparison, which every one in the court at that moment could make between the Nivernais oxen driven by their driver and the oxen turned out to fatten, penned up on the piles of manure. There was a fine rural charm about the scene. The six huge white oxen paced slowly around a veritable field of heaped-up, trampled manure, rising up to a height of more than eighty inches above the soil of the court, and held up by an enclosure of iron bars between solid posts, as is done on estates where they like durable buildings. On this plateau of manure, containing more than six hundred cart loads that they would cart away later and spread on the fallow lands, and which made them conspicuous in the middle of the court—walked, turned, or dozed, forty oxen with red or fawn-coloured or white-spotted coats. They were light-

ly built beasts bought in the neighbourhood, who were to pass there, upon that warm, decomposing litter smoking under their bellies, the days and nights of winter and autumn, and then be sent down to the meadows in the spring to put on fat, before starting for the slaughter house. Troughs full of water were placed at certain distances, and others full of beet pulp from the refineries mixed with chopped straw. The cattle were eating, drinking, or walking in circles or standing in quiet contemplation as suited their fancy. The enclosure had but one opening, at the farther end, the part the most distant from the house. But a dog chained there, and with his eyes watching his prisoners, guarded this single door. Pigeons, hens, and ducks lived with the cattle upon the same manure pile, and warmed themselves by the same hidden fire. A large passageway led all around the field of manure, a paved road where men, animals, and loaded wagons could pass; outside the buildings formed a long rectangle, the house of the foreman, the stables, a cow-shed, an old sheep-fold, another cow-shed, workshops, barns, storehouses, pig-pens, all with walls of red brick and roofs of red tiles. All this enormous apparatus of the farm was commanded by a monumental gate hung between two high columns of brick and crowned by a pediment also in brick, but grown green with rain and blackened by dust and smoke. Only through this gate could you see from the court the country itself and a few green fields. Nevertheless, facing it, toward the West, you realized that the enclosure of the walls must be

prolonged beyond the last cow-shed, and that there must be behind it a kitchen-garden, and, enclosed in the rural fortress, some trees, whose branches, already stained by mildew, could be seen hanging over a depressed roof.

The stately procession of the huge white oxen of Nièvre made a striking spectacle in this framework of red stone, on its way around the manure pile gilded by the light, and one judged as it passed by the workmen in the cow-sheds, by the oxen of Hainaut who stopped eating pulp, and the pigeons frightened by such great horns and such giant backbones. All the farm, excepting the foreman, who apparently paid no attention to them, seemed to be saying: "Are they not handsome! Are they not well guided! What a beautiful handle of red wood behind the yoke!" Gilbert felt himself watched. He went straight on, followed by his six oxen in the bright sunshine, to the cow-shed where he found twenty other white oxen from Nièvre, all young ones, three and four years old, that had been trained to pull by the collar. While unyoking his oxen he laughed, thinking of those collars, those harnesses which look like rags, and which take away from the teams the sculptural bar of the yoke, their unison of movement, and that fine twisting of the twin heads, which bend together to the effort and lift themselves up when all goes well.

The afternoon was employed by Gilbert in taking care of his animals and in visiting the rural town of Pain-Fendu. The Nivernais drover had seen fine farms, certainly, and more elaborate

methods of culture, perhaps, but nowhere had he met under a single farmer so extended an estate, such vast cow-sheds, such abundance of material, nor that industrious air of a factory, which he saw here in this frontier corner, nor had he ever seen so rugged and suffering an expression on the earth itself. Already in coming from the railway station, about a mile away, he had felt that he was a stranger in this flat country without hedges, with a narrow horizon on account of the milky light, which absorbed the distances and out of which arose only the undefined silhouettes of villages, bristling with factory chimneys, and fragments of suburbs melting into the country. He did not know their names; he only knew that the great collection of houses, almost a town, which he had passed through, was called Onnaing.

The sun and the flies made the cattle bellow and kick about, penned up in the large court; and the odour of manure rose between the walls. The four-wheeled wagons which had carried the sheaves of the last gleanings, came in with a halo of white dust. Oaths could be heard and the noise of trailing chains, the tread of horses and of oxen trampling the door sill as they passed over it. Then the drovers who lodged at Onnaing or at Quarouble left the farm. Gilbert Cloquet went with those who lived at Pain-Fendu, into the dining-room on the basement floor, ornamented with crude blue paper, checked with white, where the servants took their meals. They sat down at a long table of waxed oak, jugs of beer, white plates and napkins—which they had not had at

La Vigie. There were the two drovers, three servants employed about the horses and the wagon office, two women of the farm, charged with the dairy work and who smelt of curdled milk, and at the upper end of the table the tall Jude Heilman, with his fat face, high-coloured and brutal. Near him sat his young wife, and when Gilbert Cloquet saw her, in the light of the lamp mingled with that of the day, he hesitated to seat himself, intimidated, as if he had been in the presence of some great lady in the land of Nièvre. But Perrine Heilman was not a great lady. She was dressed in a black gown, protected by a lavender linen apron with shoulder-straps; she was active, simple and gay, she had an eye for everything from the kitchen and the poultry yard to the dairy and the cowsheds themselves, and those who knew the farm of Pain-Fendu were wont to say that the foreman was the foreman's wife, and that the one did all the talking and the other all the work. But Gilbert saw only the fair brown hair, in glossy braids, twisted around her head, the slim and blue-veined neck, the rosy face, a little round, not of as delicate features as that of Madame de Meximieu, less spirituelle than that of Mademoiselle Antoinette Jacquemin, but gentle with a just will and a ready and discreet kindness, and eyes touched with red brown, like sprigs of mignonette, which were looking at him, the newcomer. He bowed awkwardly as he had done in his youth before a statue of the Madonna, fastened to the trunk of an oak tree, and took his seat at the table. Madame Heilman, to the great astonishment of Gil-

bert, crossed herself on taking her place at the table, then she served the soup and portioned out the boiled beef. The men ate ravenously, talking and shouting at each other. Madame Heilman laughed sometimes at something which they said, but they scarcely addressed a word to her, being embarrassed by her lack of vulgarity, more than by her authority. Her husband, erect, towering by a head over all the others at the table—and there were some tall men among them—swallowed regularly the soup, bread and meat and drank large draughts of beer, looking at the wall in front of him as if, behind it, he could see the fields where the harvest was finished, where the weary lands waited and demanded repose. And he, in imagination, was tearing them up, turning them over again, separating them, distributing their crops, and forcing them to life. Vision and calculation were rarely absent from these steadfast eyes, hard to the land, hard to men, hard to animals. At table he was as if dumb. He gave his orders in the morning, at half-past five, or at six o'clock, according to the season, when all of the employees of the great land factory were assembled in the court.

The supper was nearly over when one of the drovers took from his pocket a pipe and a package of Belgian tobacco, crammed his bowl, then, tipped back in his chair, lighted his pipe and his face shone red and blue through the light of the flame and smoke. He remained sitting, leaning with his two elbows upon the table, while the other servants left the dining-room to go and

smoke out doors, or to take the fresh air on the road before the gate, and the maid-servants cleared away the plates and jugs. Gilbert had not spoken a word. He also wanted to smoke, but the act of this Picard, lighting his pipe in the presence of the wife of the master and so near her, had seemed to him rude. That was not the way in Nièvre, and, a little to give a lesson, a little, also, from the desire of appearing well, he moved his chair away from the table, carried it to the stove, which was at the end of the room, and raising his cap, said:

"With your permission, mistress?"

He showed his pipe outstretched.

"Certainly, Monsieur Cloquet, every one can smoke here."

She had turned around to say that, then she began again to listen to her husband who, towering two feet above her, his chin drawn in to his neck, his upper lip advancing, was speaking with contempt, guarding his voice, and probably scolding Madame Heilman for some failure in the unlimited and never-ending programme which she had to fill. When he had left the dining-room she assisted the maids in putting everything to rights, and as she passed near Gilbert, she said:

"I saw a little while ago the finest Nièvre oxen which I have ever seen here. If they are as good in harness, they are wonderful."

"You are very good to them," said Gilbert, removing his cap from his head as if he promised to repeat to the absent what had just been said about them.

He rose when he had finished his pipe. The

room was deserted. In the court, under the stars without a moon, the animals were sleeping, lying down or standing with their feet apart to keep their equilibrium better. Gilbert wanted to know his new country. The great door remained open on the fields until ten o'clock; after that the citadel was closed and there remained only, on the flat plain, a brick fortress against which the wind broke in waves. Gilbert went out, his hands in his pockets. The brick columns and the lintel cut out an immense square, half sky and half plain. A warm and tremulous wind passed through it. Three men were seated upon a pile of stones to the right of the entrance. Farther away, Gilbert saw another who had his arm placed around the waist of a woman, one of the servants, doubtless. A sudden sadness made him turn away from this corner where they were making love. The drover leaned his head outside of the gate, to the left, and beyond the abyss of shadow in which road, earth, and telegraph poles were swallowed up, he saw a flame which gave no light and was enveloped by a slender dancing halo.

"What is that?" he inquired.

A voice replied:

"The tall chimney of the furnace of Quiévrain, Quiévrain in Belgium. Don't you know anything?"

He did not reply, but turned on his heel and went back to the stable where he was to sleep.

His bed was no longer, as in the early years at La Vigie, placed in a corner of the stable and protected against the horns of the cattle by a frame-

work of wood, but suspended five feet from the ground, in the midst of the long row of animals, lighted by a lantern hung at the end of an iron rod. Gilbert mounted by the ladder, after having inspected the mangers to see whether his cattle wanted anything, and there, above some thirty moving backs, lined to the right and the left, and whose whiteness diminished gradually to the end of the long building, he tried to sleep. In spite of the fatigue of the journey he remained awake for a long time. He was not thinking of Marie, or of the hamlet of Pas-du-Loup, or of his comrades, or of anything which had happened so recently. The shame, the fear of suffering, made him drive away the memories of the day before and go back to the period when he had slept in a lair very like this, at Monsieur Fortier's. He compared, with this past, what he had just learned of the country of the Picards, and concluded: "Why have I come to Onnaing rather than to Lyon, or to the environs of Paris, or upon the table-lands of Champagne where there are also sugar refineries?" And he did not find any reason, and therefore he felt that he was a stranger, that nothing welcomed him, that nothing held him. He went over the smallest happenings of the evening, the faces of the people. In spite of himself, the image of that woman clasped by a man a little while ago, in the shadow of the portal, returnd to him with persistence and troubled him. At home he paid little attention to the youths and maids whom he met thus courting, except to think: "They will marry, and the sooner

the better!" But why, in this corner of the Picard country, should these visions be more tenacious? Why did the blood of a drover, who had already lived a long life, grow hot like that of a young man? Gilbert understood that the change was not only around him. He felt that he was weaker than at Fonteneilles. The habitual witnesses of his life were so far, so far away.

The stiff breeze of Picardy played against the stable walls.

XI.

THE TILLAGE OF PICARDY.

THE next day, having fed his animals, he carefully yoked his four best oxen with the yokes with red handles, quite resolved to leave Pain-Fendu if they obliged him to change his beautiful Nivernais fashion, and, having stopped his team before the door of the foreman's house, he went, with the other drivers and servants, to get slices of bread and butter and a quart of beer which he put in an old game bag loaned him by one of his comrades, and then he set out for the plain. Heilman, following the orders of the farmer, had distributed the work to the assembled men and animals.

It was hard ploughing, far off on the side of the stream of Quarouble, which one could distinguish by some dwarf willows and by the herbs, the only green with that of the cabbages in the great space which had a golden hue from the boundless stretch of oat and wheat stubble. Vast plain which had forgotten shadows! The earth, parched for months, did not crumble under the ploughshare; it turned in long furrows like rafters, it fell across the plough, it creaked, dust and acrid smoke escaped, and the field mice and the insects, not having been able to dig their lairs deep enough, ran with the torn-up roots of grain over the sabots of the

men. At a little distance from Gilbert, other teams were ploughing. But they stopped oftener to rest than his, and longer. It was not ten o'clock in the morning and the space ploughed by Gilbert's four oxen made, in the dull yellow of the stubble, a spot a third larger than the others, and which smoked like a miry channel stirred by the sun.

"Good work," said Heilman, who passed in his high boots, a straw hat on his head; "but your oxen will be foundered before the week's end."

"Neither they nor I," replied Gilbert.

"We shall see, when the digging of the beets comes, fifty acres and fifteen hundred thousand kilos to get in before the fifteenth of November."

The master continued his way, growing smaller in the plain, but always taller than the drivers with whom he stopped a moment to talk.

In the evening the sole topic of conversation at Pain-Fendu was this Nivernais driver and his oxen. Gilbert heard his name at table, murmured, praised, or mocked at. He ate, more tired a little than the evening before, and even more of a stranger. After supper he began to smoke, in the same place, near the stove. The wife of the foreman had paid no attention to him, occupied as she was in helping the men and in replying to the gossip of the maids who were talking of their plans for the next Sunday. But when the men had gone out she approached Gilbert, as she had done the evening before, and remaining standing near him, who was still seated, she asked:

"And what will you do with your day to-morrow?"

"Nothing, Madame Heilman."

"You do not go to mass?"

"No."

She placed her hand upon the shoulder of the driver, with a compassionate gesture.

"You seem to be unhappy, Monsieur Cloquet. A good worker like you! Are you homesick for your country?"

"No."

"If you are ill, we are not hard here; you will be well cared for! You must tell us."

She felt that she was looked up at, as by a dog that one caresses. In the gleam of this long look she saw surprise, gratitude, emotion, and a desire that it should not finish. She began to laugh.

"Come! When you have been here a week you will be quite at home. You are no longer a young man, and one would think you were a great child! My poor Cloquet!"

She went away, carrying a chair which she wished to put in its place, and already preoccupied again by her work. Gilbert had risen. He left the room without turning around; he went down the steps; he made the circuit of the court where the red cattle were tramping upon the pile of manure, and he took refuge, quite at the end of the enclosure of the farm, near the forge whose fire was dead. And he seated himself, passing his two hands over his forehead to chase away the too gracious vision and the words which kept returning: "My poor Cloquet." How she had said it! Yes, as formerly Adèle Mirette had said it, the wife whom he had loved, she whom he would

have loved especially in this hour of abandonment! It was the same accent, and the same gesture, and, in the glance, the same pure tenderness. "Look at yourself in my eyes, my Cloquet, look at yourself; I suffer when you suffer!" Oh! that old word, never heard again during such long years, and which revived suddenly, in the memory of the past, and which overflowed his heart! She was so pretty, this Madame Heilman! Gilbert heard the horses fighting in the neighbouring stable, and he ran there, swearing as he was not accustomed to do, and, with a blow of the double lash, he separated them so brutally that he said to himself:

"What is the matter with me this evening, that I hurt the animals?"

The next day, Sunday, he, generally so economical, went out as soon as his animals were cared for, breakfasted and dined at a restaurant of Onnaing, and did not return to the farm until night. All day long he had wandered alone, like a soldier who arrives in a garrison, up and down the road of Valenciennes, and in the dingy quarters which are near the railway station.

Soon the rains began. The great ploughings lasting for weeks occupied and wearied the men, horses and oxen. The sun rose later and set more quickly in the fogs which waited, all the afternoon, rolled at a little distance above the fields where they were working, and which settled down as soon as the rays of the sun grew feebler. Then the harvesting of the beets began. In the soaked lands Gilbert and his comrades now drove the

four-wheeled wagons, loaded with beets, to the sugar refinery of Onnaing. The six Nivernais oxen were not too many to drag the wagon from the ruts which the enormous weight hollowed beneath the iron tires of the wheels. It was necessary to stop to let the animals breathe. "What do you look for in the horizon, Cloquet? Is it trees? There are none with us. Is it your mistress? The time has passed *mon vieux!* Is it a glass of beer? You will find that nearer you!" They joked him discreetly because of his forbidding air. They tried to question him to see what he knew of the world. But he did not lend himself to that either. After a few fruitless attempts to draw him into conversation about the country of Nièvre or other topics, his comrades ceased to interrupt his thoughtfulness or to explain it. They considered him as one of those shepherds who lose the habit of speech, little by little, and who keep to themselves, knowing how to talk only with their sheep and dogs.

What was the matter with him? A fixed and bad idea possessed him. Gilbert would have done better to have left the farm. He had spoken to himself about it, two or three times. But the will had failed him. He knew that he was weak, he remained, and he hid himself to watch the wife of Jude Heilman pass. The foreman's wife did not appear to notice the strange bearing of this man who watched her, evening and morning. He did not approach her, he gazed at her crossing the court, opening a window or accompanying a merchant or a visitor. When he was near her, at

meal times, he was embarrassed, and only raised his eyes by stealth; then, as soon as the last mouthful of bread was swallowed, he went out. Since she had lived in the midst of this floating world of servants and of day-labourers, she had often been obliged to defend herself against the one or the other. But this one was a new kind, more sombre, more disquieting. What was to be done? She had comprehended, from the second day, that there was passion in the silence of Gilbert Cloquet, and she avoided giving food to this bad dream; but her manner had not changed and Madame Heilman remained as gay, as lively and natural in the presence of the drover as if she understood nothing. "If I have him sent away," she thought, "where will he go?"

One day, however, she called him. It was in the third week of October. A butcher of Quiévrain had come to Pain-Fendu. In the corridor of the house he was talking noisily with the wife of the foreman. He was a friend and frequenter of the farm, and a buyer sometimes. He asked about the price and condition of the cattle. His name was Jean Hourmel; a stout man, young, who enjoyed a great reputation for luck, loyalty, and animation in business, and who had a kind of jovial quality and ease, the result of this good reputation, which he carried with him. Madame Heilman was alone at home; her husband would not be in before noon. She offered a glass of beer to the Belgian butcher, who declined with a wave of the hand and asked to visit the cow-sheds. The young woman accompanied him to the en-

trance of the corridor, glanced around the court, as if searching for some one, said a few words in an undertone to Monsieur Hourmel, and called with her slightly drawling voice:

"Monsieur Cloquet?"

The tawny beard and the clear eyes of the Nivernais were framed in the opening of a dormer window.

"Monsieur Cloquet, show Monsieur Hourmel the stables."

The butcher, who wore upon his arm a skin of gray kid, and who had no blouse over his jacket such as most of his colleagues of Central France or of Paris wear when they travel, stopped at first facing Gilbert, and regarded the drover with fixed attention, serious and silent. His jovial expression had disappeared. A slight grimace raised up the smooth-cut moustache. He finished his examination with a nod of the head of which he kept the meaning to himself, and followed Gilbert, who knew the farm perfectly, and could explain everything. After the first moment of constraint the conversation grew animated between the two men whom their calling brought together. They chatted of France and of Belgium, of pasturage and of trade, and Gilbert was led on to talk about his youth and the formation of the union of the wood-cutters of Nièvre. The other was approving: "I know about that! It is the same way with us; only, you appear to me to be without religion in your country? That does not bother us? With us it helps." A little later he said: "You must come to see me,

Gilbert Cloquet!" He was a kindly man, this butcher of Quiévrain. He was fraternal with this unknown drover met at the farm; he had the strength which has no need of words to attract, and the compassion which is understood, even when it jokes.

"You need diversion; I can see that; well, then, come to the *grande ducasse!*"

"What is that?"

"The fête of the patron saint of Quiévrain, the consecration, the *ducasse* as they say with us, which is celebrated the Sunday which follows the eighteenth of October, that is next Sunday; my wife will lay a plate for you."

"I will go," said Gilbert.

Sunday, the twenty-first of October, was a day of respite for him and almost a joyous day. About half-past ten, the drover took at Onnaing the tram-way from Valenciennes, and in half an hour he was in Belgium. The butcher's house was easily found; you only had to follow the car line, then go up one street and take a turn at right angle, and it was there, on the right, at a short distance. A door of varnished oak, by the side of the butcher's stall, opened on a room which served as sitting and dining-room, with a kitchen in the rear, behind that was a court and the warehouses. The house had a respectable air. The owners received Gilbert as a friend, and Madame Hourmel, a tall, slim woman, with flat cheeks, and soft eyes full of the anxiety of the housekeeper, did the honours as for a prince. "Sit down, won't you take a cup of coffee? Would you rather have beer? Come,

Hourmel, put some coal on the fire! Monsieur Cloquet must be cold?"

The poor man for a long time had not met with this eagerness from people glad to see him, to care for him and to cheer him up. In the living room his shoes stretched out and smoking against Madame Hourmel's nickelled stove, he admired the gay-flowered paper which covered the walls, the religious chromo-lithographs in their frames, the wall pocket given as a souvenir by some shop, the two chamois heads in terra-cotta, the chairs of white waxed oak, a sideboard in two compartments, whose glass case was full of multi-coloured plates and objects, useless in so simple a household, such as sugar tongs, asparagus forks, fish knives, spoons of every shape and of every size, cups and baskets in glittering metal. He admired it all. They told him stories of Quiévrain. He forgot his own sad one. They remained a long time at table in the warmth of the stove. The butcher's wife understood that the Frenchman had had great trouble and that he was without moral support of any kind. She said, seriously, for she had a kind of grave and impartial goodness:

"I am going to go and wait upon the customers while you will go and see the fête of *ducasse*, Hourmel and you; but I beg you, hereafter, to consider our house as that of one of your friends."

"Of my friend, then," replied Gilbert, "for I do not know of any other, unless I may call Monsieur Michel so."

"You have no friend? Neither man nor woman?

Ah, ha! You blush. Ah! You should not have hidden that from us! A Frenchman never grows old, we ought to remember that. Amuse yourselves!"

The two men passed the afternoon like two children, Gilbert catching a little of the gayety of the jovial humour of the butcher Hourmel. They shot rifles in the shooting gallery; they joined at the play of the popinjay, in a meadow on the bank of the Honelle, they watched the workmen and women of Quiévrain and Blanc-Misseron dance; they visited friends who offered them coffee, and when, late in the evening, they separated at the street-car station, after having supped together in the little room with the chamois heads, they were in high good humour and content to have made each other's acquaintance. Hourmel asked:

"*Au revoir*, is it not? How much longer do you stay at Pain-Fendu?"

"Perhaps a week, perhaps always. But, if I stay there I will return here."

"In any case, come before the seventeenth of November," said Hourmel, "for then I am going off on a trip."

And the train disappeared in the night toward Onnaing.

XII.

THE SQUALL.

The most dismal weeks of the year had come. All day and all night clouds heavy with rain followed each other almost without intermission across the sky. The sea had put into them life and nourishment for millions of ears of grain, for flowers, trees, and men, for more plants and living things than there were upon the earth. To the wind it had ordered: "Spread abroad this vital force and what is not needed will return to the deep to come forth anew." And the wind drenched the countries of the North. All through Belgium and French Flanders and Holland and the lower provinces of Germany they were gathering in with difficulty the last harvests, carts were stuck in the mire, the wagoners were swearing, and there were days when the men of the country were shut indoors, waiting for the clear weather which did not come.

Melancholy hours, dangerous for those who cherish in their heart an unhealthy dream. Before the end of the first fortnight in November, Monsieur Walmery had had dug up the enormous quantity of sugar beets grown and ripened upon fifty acres of ground. Huge wagons had carried the whole harvest to the sugar works. The

farmer then ordered Heilman to recommence the ploughing, and, in spite of the bad weather, all the teams of the farm spent ten hours outside, and the soaked earth glistened behind them, smoothed by the iron plough-shares. The men protected their shoulders with old jackets, or flour sacks, or carter's coats. The rain sent its black torrents from east to west, from north to south, and the animals themselves had red eyelids, on account of the continuous lashing of the water. The wind shook the rooks in flight. The grass whistled over the smooth-shaven sods. Sometimes, the ploughmen returned, unable to hold out against the downfall. And if it happened that there was but one left in the field, that one was always Gilbert Cloquet, to whom had been entrusted a new plough which the three pairs of oxen drew, with lowered horns, panting in rhythm upon their straining legs.

It happened that on Friday, the 16th of November, the men were forced, at ten o'clock in the morning, to return in haste to Pain-Fendu. The sky, covered with a single leaden cloud which seemed motionless and without a rift, had poured down a penetrating, close, continuous rain, which beat the hair of the beasts and twisted it into knots, between which, at the touch of the water and the wind, the red skin of the flanks quivered.

"The animals pull no more!" said Heilman. "It is enough to make them sick. Men, we must turn in."

And seeing that Gilbert continued his ploughing, he cried:

"The order is for everybody, for the Nivernais as well as for the lads of Flanders!"

Gilbert did not seem to hear him.

The six oxen, beneath the pouring rain, continued to pull; they walked on, enveloped by the mist of their breath and by the vapour which rose from their backs. The drover behind seemed taller than usual, in the blonde aureole of his steaming team.

"Work yourself to death, then, if you want to, Nivernais! But if one of your oxen is sick, you will have to pay for it!"

All the ploughs but one took the road back to the farm, following each other. Gilbert remained alone in the immense field. The pale spot of the six oxen travelled over the smooth soil, in the rain under the low cloud. The children of the village who looked from far away through the window panes, said: "What is that white thing down there, which moves?"

Gilbert had not obeyed because Heilman had become hateful to him, because passion had taken possession of the drover and made him crazy. He no longer slept. He quarrelled with the servants for the most trifling reasons, especially with those who seemed to him to be in favour with Madame Heilman. He no longer greeted the foreman, he no longer answered him. The phlegmatic Heilman bore with this humour and bothered himself very little about it, knowing that authority is difficult to exercise in farms where there are always outsiders mixed with the workmen from the neighbourhood. He even made excuses for

Gilbert. "He is an old man," he said, "perhaps he may have brought troubles from home that we do not know about. And anyway, he is strong!" Strength pleased him as the finest thing that he knew.

No, it was not the sorrow brought from home which had turned Gilbert's head, it was the nearness of this beautiful young woman met on the farm, and the remoteness of familiar things which would have held in check the tempted spirit and the flesh which was weakening. How far away they were, all the witnesses of his honest life, all those who could have mocked or reproved or advised! Nothing now recalled Mère Cloquet, nor his childhood wrapped in her glance and protected by it, nor the years of love, nor the long period when Gilbert had remained faithful to the house, the garden, the bed of wood, the pewter spoon, and the memory of the dead. Étienne Justamond had not written. No news had come about Michel. All his habits had been broken up, the companionship of his friends, their talks, the work in the woods, the forest scenery and the pastures. And in the emptiness, this evil desire had grown and now it was the master of this man who was almost old. Not a word had encouraged him, not a glance. Gilbert had seen, indeed, that Madame Heilman kept on her guard and avoided speaking to him or meeting him. He wished evil to her husband, the obstacle, his master. His insane jealousy made the orders, the supervision, and even the presence of Heilman odious to him. At times he hoped that a wagon

wheel would go over the body of that calm young giant; he longed to see the foreman kicked by a horse, or crushed by a bag of grain falling from the granary, or that a ladder should break under his feet. If the husband should disappear, the wife would become less distant, she would be weaker and less well-guarded. Gilbert was conscious that ideas bordering on crime touched him. Sometimes he felt a horror of himself; he saw his folly; he realized that he had passed the age when he could please a woman, and despair seized him. "Why live? What reason is there for work, when no one pays any attention to me? When no one will ever care for me any more?" His comrades said: "What is the matter with him now?" He spoke to no one and he rose in the morning without having slept, asking himself if he was not going "to make away with himself." Then a woman came down the stairway of the farm house; a voice called the maid; a hand drew the curtain of the great dining-hall; and ardent desire kindled itself in the eyes of the drover and fever came in his blood, and he had the wrinkled eyelids and the furtive trembling of a cat which watches a bird near by.

How he had changed in a short time! Where was his idea of justice? To tell the truth, he had never thought of extending it beyond the questions of his own interest. Besides, he did not reason; he loved. The novelty of the temptation had conquered at once this lonely being.

Gilbert, ploughing in the tempest of rain, imagined, so supreme had his folly become, that he

saw before him, upon the fallow land that his oxen were going to break, the tall, fresh woman with her hair dressed like that of a lady, and those calm eyes which had had pity on him, in those first days. He saw her and he spoke to her aloud, so loud that the oxen no longer hearing their own names were bewildered and lost their spirit.

After an hour, however, the drover unharnessed his animals and went back himself. When he had taken care of his oxen and had tethered them before their full cribs, he thought of changing his clothes. As he had only two coats for his whole wardrobe, he had to put on his jacket with horn buttons, and his broad-brimmed felt hat, and as his sabots were drenched, he put on the boots which he only wore on Sundays. Then he rejoined the other workmen.

The latter were at work in the covered barn which was built directly opposite the house buildings, on the other side of the court, and in the warehouses which rose farther beyond, forming a third line of constructions. Heilman had given the order to clean and oil the farming utensils and the wagons. The servants, dissatisfied, murmured, saying that they were made to do the cart-wright's work. They loitered about, asked each other questions, and urged each other to stop work, speaking loud enough to be heard by the foreman who was inspecting the stables. As almost always happens when there are several who are trying not to work, two of the men began to quarrel in the barn where Gilbert had set himself to moving and to piling up some thick oaken planks.

The quarrel was only half serious and both men saw in it a means to drink a bottle of beer, to seal their peace at Monsieur Walmery's expense. They held each other clutched around the waist. Gilbert interfered.

"Enough," said he, "Gatien, you will hurt him. You are the stronger; don't be a coward!"

"The stronger?"

Victor, the little Walloon, grown red as a tile, pressed Gatien to the point of stifling him, and threw him down in the dust of the barn, against the wheel of a dismantled wagon. There was a shout. Heilman came in by a side door, swore from habit, and separated the combatants; but as he secretly liked to watch wrestling and games of strength, he said:

"Fine, all the same. Little devil of a Walloon! He could whip two such at a time, on my word."

Victor, out of breath and covered with dust, pulled up the leather belt which supported his trousers. He slowly turned his square head with its gleaming, narrow eyes, yellow and bloodshot like those of a bull. He was standing on the open ground, between the box of the dismantled wagon and the high pile of thick oak planks upon which Gilbert stood. Five or six men who had come from the stables, the forge, and the warehouses watched him, laughing. Gatien shrugged his shoulders and retied his red cravat. The downfall continued outside. The rain fell on the gray walls along the shed, which was open on its longest side, and shut by a double brick partition on the side of the court. It made a noise like a torrent. The fore-

man felt a desire for some diversion. The pungent odour of the flying dust excited his nerves.

"I bet on Victor!" he said. "Strong back, the little Walloon—great strength——"

"What do you bet?" called the blacksmith from a corner.

A voice near him, that of a little shepherd who was looking out the door, answered:

"Hallo! Here comes Madame Heilman! The one who wins may kiss the foreman's wife."

"That's it!" cried loud, amused voices. "Who will try for the wager?"

Heilman said nothing. He consented, indulgent, like all the countryside, to these familiarities allowed in public. He, too, had seen his wife approaching. She came, running, jumping from one stone to another, wearing laced sabots, with her head covered by a gray knit shawl, which she wore on very cold mornings when she went to superintend the dairy. As she came in under the vast roof, two more men arrived from the stables and the granaries, like pigeons who drop down from the roof. Victor said to her: "Mistress, the one who wins in the match is to kiss you!" She shrugged her shoulders, as mothers do, who think that there is a grain of foolishness in the demands of their children and she said:

"I came to tell Heilman that the beer is drawn."

She sat down upon an oak block which stood against the brick wall and frowned slightly as she saw Gilbert, who had jumped from the top of the pile of planks to the ground, and who was

preparing to wrestle. With a twist of the hand he had thrown his jacket upon the wagon pole and he went up within two paces of Victor.

"I challenge you all!" he said.

"Bravo, *le vieux!*" cried a voice; "he is gallant!"

"He's not strong! Give him a good lesson, Victor! Down with the Nivernais! *Vive* the Walloons!"

A confused racial rivalry stirred in them all. They formed a half circle, stretching out their necks and several showed their yellow teeth between their thick lips, chapped with the cold.

"Look out, Victor! He is bigger than you."

"Yes, but he is thirty years older. Don't take your eyes off him, Victor!"

The two men were silent, like duellists, and each sought, with his eyes the place on the other's body where he was going to throw his arm. But while the smaller man bent his legs and kept close to the ground to jump, Gilbert stood upright, with his feet a little apart, his hands high, his chest and sides unguarded. Victor took advantage of what he judged to be a bad position. He threw himself, with lowered head, against the Nivernais, clasped him at the level of the lowest ribs, and, gathering all his strength, he tried to upset him, to throw him to the left, or the right, to stifle him or to force him to bend his legs. The muscles of his neck knotted beneath the skin. Gilbert scarcely moved; only his cheeks grew flushed, and his mouth, with its yellow beard, half opened at the call of his lungs for air. He let his

adversary exhaust himself. Suddenly the arms which he had kept raised, came down; he clasped them around Victor's bent form, lifted him, and, with a strain of his back, he straightened himself up, and whirled around the man so that his legs described a circle and came down on the shoulders and the back of the old wood-cutter. A whirlwind of cries of pleasure and anger mixed, rose around the wrestlers. "Enough! He is beaten! No! You will kill him! Courage!" Gilbert, while they were still shouting, put his two hands under the body of his rival, and seizing him by the back and by the loins, burying his fingers in his garments, and even in the flesh and muscles, he lifted him again, and held him out at arm's length. Victor howled and struggled. All the men had risen. Heilman, in the tumult of applause and cries, made a sign: "Enough! Let him go!" Gilbert dropped his frightened opponent, who ran off swearing.

"Well, Gilbert," said Heilman, laughing. "You've won! You don't fight with a sluggish hand! You've learned how?"

"In the forest one learns everything," replied Gilbert, putting on his jacket again.

"Well, now!" cried a voice. "Isn't he going to kiss the mistress?"

"That's his business," returned Heilman. "Come, drink, all of you! The beer is drawn."

The men followed the foreman out into the rain and left the barn in close ranks with clattering sabots. The two last cast a glance backward. The mistress had remained seated upon the block

of oak, against the brick wall. She did not smile. They disappeared.

Gilbert Cloquet remained alone with her. He had grown very pale. He did not dare to approach her. As she said nothing and looked at him with an air of reproach and of pity, he came nevertheless, bashful as a child. The young woman looked like a statue of a saint, as little moved and as maternal.

"Kiss me, then," she said, "since you have conquered. There is nothing wrong in that."

He stooped and kissed her on the cheek. She did not repel him, but he drew away of himself.

"Monsieur Cloquet," she said, "what is wrong is the thought which you have in your heart. Do you think that I have not seen it?"

He did not reply, but he became pale as death. She spoke slowly, her large eyes wide open and full of divine justice.

"A man fifty years old! A man who has a daughter my age, a daughter married like myself! It is a shame to persecute me. I was too kind to you in the beginning."

She heard a very low voice which said:

"Yes."

The man moved still farther away.

"I do not wish to have you sent away; you have to earn your bread; but this must stop!"

The voice replied:

"Yes. It is going to stop!"

"And immediately, and for always."

For the first time he looked her full in the face,

and she saw that death had entered indeed into the heart of the drover.

"Adieu!" he said.

"Where are you going? I am not asking you to go away!"

He did not reply. He had turned away, and, taking up his felt hat, he turned to the east where the barn opened upon the court, and the court upon the country. He was soon out in the rain. A voice from the farm house cried:

"Here, Cloquet, this way! You are on the wrong road!"

A nearer voice recalled him:

"Stay, my poor Cloquet! I am not sending you away! I pity you. Only, I cannot——"

Neither voice stopped the drover or made him slacken his pace. His tall silhouette was defined in the opening of the gateway of the farm. And Gilbert turned to the left, walking rapidly in the mud of the road without seeing anything, through the rain which never ceased.

It was near noon.

When he was more than two hundred yards from Pain-Fendu, he imagined he heard, borne on the damp air, a woman's cry and the word: "Return!" But death was in his heart. The poor man hurried along the deserted road. He did not feel the water which trickled on his neck, and on his hands. "A man fifty years old! It is a shame to persecute me! She is right! I am not fit to live." He did not know where he was going; he fled; the wind blew in squalls. "She has driven me away!—I have no longer any one upon the

earth. No one!—What a life I have had! And this is the end! I have been like the others—I am a wretch— Yet, you began better, my poor Cloquet—'Begone, begone! You must not return!—It is a shame to persecute me.' Cloquet, it is to you that that has been said! Be at peace, Madame Heilman; I am going far away, I shall not return." He made his way with difficulty against the wind and the rain; the mud held his boots; the cloud like a roller pressed upon the dead earth and the closed houses.

Cloquet breathed with difficulty; he looked at the soaked ground which fled under him. The cold, the darkness, the weariness, the shame, the sorrow of a whole life, all mingled together, caused a mighty madness which developed under the furious driving rain, in that mist which weakens the blood. A flight of blackbirds, ravens, curlews, and lapwings, flew close to the ground before Cloquet, who stopped short: "Leave me alone, all of you! Touch me not! I am already unhappy enough!" The wings passed in the tempest. He tried to see where he was. On leaving the farm, he had taken the road which cuts across the fields and passes by the village of Quarouble, then follows along Quiévrechain. All the blood of his body had gone to his face, and sounded the charge around his brain. Cloquet, with his haggard eyes looked over the houses of Quarouble, undefined in the rain on his left and he thought: "I have but to find again the road of Valenciennes, and I will throw myself under the train—it passes often enough. No one will even recognize me

when I am dead." He hesitated. Shame pushed him on. Blind instinct held him back. Were those voices which came borne on the wind, from the direction of Pain-Fendu? No. The vast farm was effaced, drowned, obliterated by the tempest of rain. The thread of twisted mud across the fields had no other passer-by but the drover. Cloquet saw far away, in front of him, a little light; doubtless the window, lighted by the fire of some house on the edges of Quiévrechain that reminded him of Quiévrain, which was quite near, and of the butcher, his friend. His poor, tired, sick brain made an effort to remember a date. What had he said, Hourmel? What day had he spoken of? Was it the 17th? A journey? His memory did not respond. His ideas became confused. "I do not know. He will no longer be there. If he were, he would pity me." And it was this vague hope, this half-memory which prevented Gilbert from turning off to the path which rejoined the car track. He started on again, drenched to the skin, exhausted, unable longer to think, drunk with misery. And in the storm he reached Quiévrechain, crossed the hamlet, entered Blanc-Misseron, and mounted the small ascent of Quiévrain. Then, suddenly, at the end of his strength, having opened the door of his friend Hourmel, he fell at full length into the warm room.

Two hours later he awoke in a bed near which Hourmel was watching. The butcher took the hand of the poor Nivernais and said:

"Well, well, old man, are you better? What

possessed you to come in such weather? I'll bet you lost your way."

There was still a grain of delirium in Clòquet's glance.

"I had thought that I was not like the others, Hourmel; I am like them; I have nothing to live upon."

"Don't be afraid!" replied the butcher, making a sign to his friend to be silent; "don't be afraid! As long as I have bread, you shall not want—keep quiet! You are already better."

His wife entered as he said this. She could not explain to herself just what had happened. But, far better than her husband, she felt that poverty played but a small part here. She said in a cautious voice.

"It's a pity you are leaving to-morrow, Hourmel. He needs to be consoled, that man there. It is his soul which is sick. You should give up going to Faÿt."

"I will do better than that."

"What, then?"

"I will take him with me."

"He may not be willing to go."

"Wife, Gilbert Cloquet is our friend. If we could put him on the path?"

"So be it," answered the wife.

The next morning, Saturday, Gilbert rose as late as if he had been drinking too heavily the evening before. He wished to take leave of Hourmel. But the latter kept him.

"I am going on a journey this evening," he said

to him. "It was planned a long time ago. Since you say I am your friend, don't let's separate, come with me?"

"Where?"

"To Faÿt-Manage, which is not very far from Quiévrain."

"What are you going to do there?"

The butcher hesitated a moment before replying, began to laugh in spite of his embarrassment, and said:

"My friend, there will be there a good many Belgian comrades who will do the same thing. It is a party which we go on every year, as many as can. You do not know anything about that, you people of Nièvre. But that is exactly what you lack. Besides, you will not be obliged to do as we do. Come only out of friendship for me. Promise it?"

And Gilbert said yes. He was tired of life; he was afraid of being alone. And in the evening he took, with Hourmel, a train which carried them at first to Mons, then, about seven o'clock, to La Louvière.

The weather had cleared up. They went on foot from La Louvière to the hill of Faÿt-Manage.

XIII.

FAŸT-MANAGE.

The night was clear. They followed a long road, which was neither country nor village nor town, sometimes bordered by hedges of fields, sometimes by close rows of low houses, sometimes by the walls of factories, or by iron railings behind which one could imagine a thicket, a little wood, and the broad open roof of a villa.

Other similar roads crossed this one and went up or down. In the hollows, there were curves of meadows which lost themselves in the dusk. Then came workmen's houses, rows of gas lights placed one above the other upon a slope and the red light of a coffee house, where shadows moved, succeeded to these short spaces of unoccupied land.

Two hours before, as they entered the station of Quiévrain, to buy their tickets, Hourmel had said to his companion:

"I do not wish to take you by surprise, my poor Gilbert. You have followed me with confidence, but I must tell you what I am going to do at Faÿt. Last May I promised to go there. I, with many others, hundreds and thousands of Belgian comrades, have the custom of going there, from time to time, to pass three days in a

house of retreat. It is beautiful, our house at Faÿt; we are well off there, we live together; we hear talk about religion. We think of something else besides our business. My heart is never so at peace as it is during these days. But all the same, if you are afraid, you must not come."

"We will see," answered Gilbert; "when I have given my word, I do not take it back."

Hourmel added laughing:

"You will not be the first Frenchman whom I have brought with me. They will receive you well. It will cost you very little. And then, if you want my opinion, since you are so sad, you need to see something new."

There was even more reason than he knew. What did it matter to Gilbert whether he went here or there? His greatest fear was to find himself alone to be seized again with the terrible thoughts of abandonment and death, which he felt approach at the first moment of silence. That is why, all through the journey, he had seemed almost gay, questioning his companion unceasingly. A feeling of gratitude besides attached him to Hourmel. He liked him not only for taking him in and caring for him, but for another reason still, for not asking him: "What has happened at Pain-Fendu? Have you been sent away? Did you leave voluntarily, and why?" No, Hourmel had been satisfied with the vague words: "There, also, I had more trouble than I could bear."

They had been walking for half an hour. Behind them a group of men came. They were evidently young, from the gayety of their voices,

which rang out in the night. Hourmel pointed out with his finger, a belfry on the hill among the leafless trees.

"That is the church," he said, "the house is not far off."

At that moment the three men who were following and who were about to pass Hourmel, stopped, and one of them said:

"Ah! It is you, old fellow? You needn't say where you are going! I am going there too!"

They were three workmen of the region, two metallurgists of La Louvière and a watchman from the railway. Each carried a small valise or a hand bag. After having named them, Hourmel presented his companion:

"A Frenchman, one of my friends, who is coming to see how things are done with us."

"It is no secret," answered the watchman, smiling.

A few steps farther on they were joined by four miners of Borinage, who came from the other side of the hill. The road began to go down. On the left, in the wall following the slope a wide doorway with two swinging doors stood open. The Belgians entered in groups and, without waiting, as if at home, surrounding Gilbert Cloquet who looked on curiously. He found himself in a garden sloping upward. A gravel path led around a circular grass plot. Beyond and barring the garden was a large two-storied château of white stone. Shadows were moving about at the foot of the steps, without doubt new arrivals, and at the top, another shadow held out at arm's

length a lamp which the wind caused to smoke badly.

"This way, Chermant! Ah! It is you, Henin, and you, Derdael! How do you do! It is cold, isn't it? Come in quickly."

"Who is the man who holds the light?" asked Gilbert.

"A Jesuit father! They are the ones who preach here."

"I never saw one before. He looks like any other priest."

He mounted the steps of the stairway, and was presented by Hourmel, without being named, simply as a French friend, to the priest who held the lamp and who did not ask anything more.

"All right, my dear Hourmel. You will lodge him next to you. Welcome, sir. Ah! Here come some others!"

And he leaned again over the balustrade.

Gilbert entered a well-lighted room full of workmen in their Sunday clothes, nearly all of whom were young like those he had met along the road, and who were talking, and calling to each other without ceremony, and running noisily through the corridors.

"Ah!" he said, "how many of you will there be to sleep here this evening?"

"Between eighty and ninety," answered Hourmel, hurrying him along. "There is not room to lodge more. Come, I am going to show you your room."

They went up to the second floor. The view of

the interior astonished Gilbert less than the aspect of the façade. The rooms were very clean, it is true, but without gilt mirrors, without great curtains, without flowered counterpanes, such as he had seen at the house of the Count de Meximieu, or at Monsieur Jacquemin's; there was an iron bed with white sheets and a counterpane, a table, a wash stand of painted iron, one chair, and white walls. The most agreeable impression was that of warmth. Houses are well heated in Belgium. The comrades were noisy, but harmony and good humour seemed to reign; they knew each other; they played school-boy jokes; the majority had come several times to Faÿt. "That is my old room; tell me, father, shall I take it again?" "No, it is already assigned." Even the priests seemed to him gay, and he, being sad, was alone of his kind. "What have I come here for?" He felt a rising sense of anger against himself, and he said to himself that the next day, the next evening at least, he would be able to go away without being impolite. The preoccupation of not being rude and a little curiosity held him. He had supper in a large hall, below the chapel, and listened without comprehending much, with a stupor caused by the novelty of this mingling of reading and repast, to a workman in a jacket, who was reading aloud, lighted by a lamp, and perched in a pulpit on the left wall.

"Well, Gilbert," asked the butcher when supper was over, and as the farm labourers and the factory workers of Belgium settled themselves in a vast room adjoining the dining-room, and lighted

pipes or cigars, "Well, you are not cross with me for having brought you?"

"I do not know to-day, but to-morrow, it might be so."

The other began to laugh and as the groups formed, broke up, and formed again continually around the Nivernais wood-cutter, their broad fun, their companionship, and their faith, aroused again in him the grief of solitude.

Good people, doubtless—one of them came to talk with Gilbert and questioned him about French farms—but so different from those whom he knew!

He followed the crowd, about half-past eight, to the chapel where the eighty men in retreat chanted a canticle and responded to the evening prayer recited by a young man from Flanders, broad-faced and broad-shouldered, who uttered the words in a thoughtful voice, in a voice which expressed the faith of all youth, and which penetrated their hearts.

"Who is that?" demanded Gilbert.

"An employee of the dairy," replied his neighbour, "a youth who shoots a bow like William Tell. He brought down the parrot last Sunday."

The central altar was of oak wood, which Gilbert judged to be of good quality, and well-joined. At the base of the altar was written, in letters of gold: "*Sanctus! Sanctus! Sanctus!*"

The wood-cutter of France listened with attention, and more than once with astonishment, to the first address made that evening in the chapel of Faÿt. The preacher was a very large and very

heavy man, seated behind a table, who from the beginning mopped his forehead with a large white handkerchief which he kept in his hand. But how valiantly and forcibly he spoke! He had the soul of the people, that man, and when he ceased speaking, you imagined that you heard his heart which continued to say: "I love you, my poor people, and my life belongs to you."

Nevertheless, Gilbert went to his bed without joy and fell asleep. The Belgian wind rattled the panes.

The next evening, having listened again three times to the priest who was conducting the retreat, having sung in common, and endeavoured with ennui to think in the solitude of his chamber during the "free time," Gilbert resolved to go away. After supper he went up to a priest who was talking with some of the Belgians, a man of fifty, who had carved in his face many hollows, much suffering, and that transparency of soul which embellishes ruin and explains it. He did not know him. He did not look for him. He met him. He was one of the Jesuits of the little band of missionaries of Faÿt-Manage, but not the one who had preached. Gilbert looked at him only, without taking any part in the conversation which was lively and commonplace as it must be after a day of unaccustomed fatigue of mind. The father separated himself from the group and came to Gilbert:

"You wish," he said, "to speak with me?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Curé."

"Come outside, then; it is a beautiful night."

He opened the door of the corridor where he stood, in the current of men, like a buoy which stops bits of passing rushes, and he went out with Gilbert. The night was blue, starry, silent. A few voices penetrated it, coming from the steps of houses built on the side of Joliment. The priest walked slowly along beside the wood-cutter in an avenue of the park which made a gentle ascent to the château and which appeared immense in the semi-obscurity.

"You will pardon me if I use the familiar 'thou.' It is our custom with those we love. We are not formal in this country."

"Oh! I don't mind that. Monsieur le Marquis at home always spoke to me that way, and also Monsieur Michel. Some people don't like it. But it makes no difference to me."

"Well! my friend, what do you want to say to me?"

Under the heavy shoes of the two men the sand creaked; the cold wind drove some scattered clouds, and it would have been sharp to the pedestrians, without the shelter of the wall. Gilbert waited to speak until he was far from the house.

"I am going to leave you to-morrow morning," he said.

"Already?"

"I did not come to share the retreat myself, I came out of respect for the butcher of Quiévrain, and to tell the truth, I hardly know why."

"The hand of God is gentler than that of man," said the priest. "It has led you without forcing you, and now you want to go away? I regret it

for your sake, but you are entirely free. Only you must take your coffee to-morrow morning. I do not want you to leave fasting."

"You are very kind. I won't refuse that, but how much do I owe you?"

"Nothing, my good friend. The comrades pay twenty sous a day for everything. But you who have remained only one day, I am not willing that you should pay. You have been an invited guest, a dear passer-by, whom I regret."

The words sank into Gilbert's heart through that closed door of human tenderness. For a long time no one had spoken so to him. He had reached the place where the avenue turns and passes before a thicket of shrubs, where there is a statue of the Virgin with the Child. Gilbert looked on the other side at the long lawn almost white under the moonlight, and beyond it, behind the arches of the leafless branches, at the façade of the house, with all its windows aglow in the night. Sounds of voices and bursts of laughter rose and died away.

"Tell me, you have not been bored here?"

"Oh, no! Not that! You can say so to the preacher. I saw that he had no contempt for poor people and I saw, too, that he felt friendship for us. That is what I need sadly."

"You are unhappy?"

The wood-cutter's only answer was a sob. He controlled himself, ashamed of his weakness, and coughed to show that he was not crying.

"Say nothing, if you do not want to, my poor friend. But if to speak of your sorrow can do you

good, speak to me of it. We shall doubtless never see each other again. And then, you know, you will tell me nothing new. I have heard all the miseries of life."

"I am all alone," said Gilbert, "I am at the end of my hope."

"Your wife has left you?"

"No, she is dead. It is my daughter who has been so ungrateful, and so wicked, that I cannot even tell you what she has done. I am ashamed of it."

"Had you other children?"

"No, she was the only one. And even before she had left me, my comrades had turned their backs on me; I helped them with their union; I worked to have justice."

"And they rewarded you ill? Of course."

"They beat me. I would not help them to do wrong, and they said then that I was old."

"You are not so at all. You are still young in appearance."

"To you I can say, Monsieur le Curé, that they are right. I feel that I am growing old."

"Is that all? You have relations?"

"No. There is only one man who has never betrayed me. I cannot say that I would have voted for him—no, because he is a noble; but I love him all the same. And when I came away to the land of the Picards with the oxen, you understand, he was already so ill that I do not know if he is still alive."

"Then, what is there left to you?"

"Nothing, Monsieur le Curé; I am all alone."

"You are mistaken there, my good friend! God is left to you, and he waits for you."

"Where is he?"

"Between you and me. You do not know Him, He has made you come here so that you may hear His name. Listen to me, for I see that you have an upright soul. I am going to leave you; I am wanted; I must occupy myself with others, but nevertheless, I am unwilling that you should go away in sadness to death. Have you a good memory?"

"Yes, unfortunately, I remember everything."

"Even words?"

"All those that I understand."

"Then, after the prayer this evening, in your bed, do not go to sleep at once. Pass over in your mind the things that you have heard and which have touched your heart; in the silence you will understand better; and when you leave us, I shall feel that at least it is not without a little light, and without a little consolation."

They had walked back near the right wing of the great house. Through the slits of the window shutters the light from the lamps struck the sand. The abbé stopped; he extended his arms like those of the cross, and he said:

"My brother and my friend, embrace me!"

Gilbert felt a heart beat against his heart which loved him. He did not even know his name.

In the silence of the house of retreat, at half-past nine, when the lights were extinguished, and when, all along the corridors, in their rooms, the companions had commenced their sleep, Gilbert

Cloquet went over in his mind the words he had heard.

Whole phrases returned to him as they had been said, with their accent, with the fraternal and divine life which they contained.

"My poor brother, provided you choose it, you are rich. Your work is a prayer, and the appeal to justice, even when it mistakes the temple, is another. You raise your spade, and the angels see you; you are surrounded by invisible friends; your pain and your fatigue spring up in the harvest of glory. Oh! What joy not to be judged by men! He, He is infinite pity, boundless goodness! He seeks every upright soul. He has pardoned the blindness of the spirit. He has pardoned especially the sins of the heart and the senses. He has been severe only to the hypocrites. All the others he draws them to himself. God does not revile us. His reproach comes in a glance. Lift up only your eyes, my brother, and you will read the pardon even before the reproach."

Gilbert thought: "That is fine. I am, then, something noble, I, who believed myself merely refuse!"

And other words flowed through his memory like a tide.

"We are being tested. The bell which rings has been through the fire. You struggle to gain your living, and that is a most noble duty; you go out in the morning to work, you are in the noise, in the dust, or in the shadow of the mine,

or in the rain and the cold. He among you who thinks of his wages and of the rest which he will take in the evening is not wrong. He who thinks of his children and of his wife has more courage. If you would only think of God, you would have much courage. You would suffer no longer. But that is, perhaps, beyond your comprehension to-day. In any case, you would no longer be violent, but strong; no longer envious, but ambitious, and no longer slaves, but free. Have not your fathers had their unions, their corporations, their banners and their struggles also? They won liberty. Upon their fraternal shoulders they raised their syndics as high as the nobility. After a noble life they had a glorious death. You are only half men because you have been confined to this present life and forbidden to leave it even in thought. And you have allowed this! You are much poorer than you suppose. You have not the earth, and you have no longer heaven. O my well beloved, I want to give you back your soul, that beautiful working soul, which sings as it labours, which grows rich in justice, and which flies back to God in the light."

In another meditation, the priest had said:

"The enemies of the church continually ask themselves how far they can do it harm without hurting themselves. But you, they always harm. You are the ones whom the evil word wounds first, because you have no great defence against error; you are the grass which is always cut, over which they continue to drive their wagons full of hay. As soon as they see the point

of your mind rising toward heaven, they mow you down, they shorten you, they only leave you your root and the right to shoot up again. But they watch jealously, and the grass is never tall."

He said again:

"I call you, as did Saint Vincent de Paul, who spoke thus:

"'My heart burns with the fire of charity. Ye poor of the world, I carry you in my heart. Come to me, your poverty calls me. Sons of vice, come, children without mothers, refuse of sin, hearts in peril, come!'

"You are a marvel which amazes me, you workmen, who have come here for the retreat! When I think of the many difficulties you have in order to get a glimpse of religious truth, and the many others which you have to come here, I feel that I am your admirer as much as your friend. You have so little luggage when you arrive: A paper sack, a pair of shoes and a shirt at the end of a stick. But the luggage of truth which your mind carries is still much smaller. And its thieves cannot be numbered. Do you know what I believe? I believe that you are the forerunners, the first-called of the crowds who will arise everywhere, from the mines, the factories, the fields, the hovels, and the garrets, demanding again the heaven for which they are thirsty. You demand it of God, you! The others, they will demand it from men, with pistol shots and fires, in revolts, howlings, ruins, blasphemies; they will knead the land to see where it has been hidden, the

portion of infinite joy, the tiny piece of radium which does not exhaust itself; they will destroy what they covet, to see what pleasure there is in the abuse of power! They will strew the streets with money which should have served for alms, they will have everything, except what they are looking for. You imagine that it is bread which you need? A little. But the famine is deeper. It is God whom you need. Pray to Him with me."

The priest had spoken of many other things: of sin, of death, of redemption and of the family. In the last meditation he had praised hope as if he had divined the secret trouble of Gilbert:

"My well-beloved, what is life without the faith in paradise? A horror. You suffer; you abhor yourselves; you say it to each other; you prove it; you fight for the five francs that your neighbour has laid aside; for a rabbit skin which he may have more than you. Self-interest is sad, always; it is discontented, always. But by the hope of paradise, the whole face of the world is changed! You try, indeed, to make life more easy, and that is every one's right. But how you rise above it! How it loses its sorrow! The beggar! If it laughs so much the better; but if it weeps, even trouble has its value. We are no longer afraid of it, nor of death. Have you ever thought of that? To find ourselves, all of us, not only with our parents, our children, our friends, but with the noblest of all the races, of all the ages! The full assembly of all the brave, all

the good, all noble souls chanting the same hallelujah! What heirs you are! I counsel you to be proud of it and to despise no one. Some of your comrades will be there whom you will be amazed to meet. You will go up to them: 'Well, you were a notorious scoundrel! I was, but one moment has redeemed me.' However low you may have sunk, as long as you live hope is there, she descends with us to the depths of the abyss; you have only to call her and she lends you her wings."

All this, everything indeed, that he had heard came back in the silence, and sank deep into the wood-cutter's heart. Lying in bed, his eyes closed, he had never before had so many consecutive thoughts, such springs of tenderness and of regret, so many memories which fought some for and some against. Finally he said: "I will go." The tears came to his eyes and flowed very softly. A matin bell rang. Without knowing why, he sat upright, he placed himself on his knees, as he was, upon his bed, and he sought for words to say. Finding none, he made a great sign of the cross. It was the only prayer which he remembered. It put him to sleep, as if sleep had waited for this sign to descend.

The next morning he got up but he did not go away.

The evening of that same day, which was Monday, he went to find the priest with whom he had made the tour of the park, and he received absolution for all that there was to be absolved in his poor life. It was late. Like others, he had put

off to the last moment this confession which cost him much. On leaving the cell of the priest, he felt as light as a fly in the sunshine. Before opening the door, he rubbed his hands with satisfaction. He opened it and saw four companions who were waiting and he said to them:

"It is your turn! There is nothing to be afraid of, you know!"

"Bravo, *le vieux!*" they replied.

He followed the corridor to the end, entered his room and opened the window which looked out upon the park. The air, which was cold, seemed balmy to him. There was undoubtedly a certain joyfulness floating about in the night. The stars spoke to Gilbert, and bade him good-morning. He breathed deeply, in full breaths, his head uplifted, and it seemed to him that he had still a child's heart in his breast. And it was of his childhood, that very distant past, that he dreamt at first, of the days at La Vigie, the days when Mère Cloquet waited for her boy, every Sunday, on the topmost step of the church. "I have been a long time coming, mother," he said, "but here I am." Then he thought of the next day, and his face saddened. He lighted his lamp and gazed at himself in the little round mirror, which hung upon the wall. "That is not possible," he murmured, "that is not suitable." And, going out of his room, he went and tapped at Hourmel's door.

The butcher had begun to undress.

"What do you want, Gilbert?"

The wood-cutter showed him his necktie, once

green but now stained and faded by the heavy wetting it had received, and he said gravely:

"I do not think that I can do this with such a cravat."

"It is certainly not handsome. Do you want mine?"

"No. With us, we are vain, Hourmel. When my daughter, who is named Marie, took her first communion, she was the best-dressed girl in all Fonteneilles. And my Easter, you see, ought to be like Marie's. For more than ten years, and even more than twenty, I have kept it waiting."

"That is true," said Hourmel, so as not to oppose his friend.

He sought to collect his thoughts—all the muscles of his heavy face grew tense—and he remembered that one of his comrades before coming to Faÿt had been at a wedding.

"He will lend you his white cravat, old man, and you will have the air of a prince. I will go and ask him at once."

He went. The next day, in the midst of the eighty men assembled in the chapel of Faÿt, there was one who wore a white cravat, "to celebrate his November Easter." He was the son of Mère Cloquet.

When they saw that he remained at Faÿt, especially when they knew that he had returned to the faith, the Belgian comrades showed him their friendship, which expressed itself in many ways; in smiles, words, and shaking of hands, tactfully and fraternally. "Well!" said one, "you must be satisfied!" then afraid of having offended the

wood-cutter: "It was just what happened to me, you know. I was behind in my account for several years, and now I am out of debt!" Another said: "Tell me, you who are from the other side of the frontier, do you not find this strange? Three days ago I did not know you, and to-day it is as if we had lived together always." Gilbert replied: "Yes, when we arrived here we were of all kinds; now there is only one kind." A great number of them gave him invitations; those whose rooms were near his, or who sat near him at table, miners or metallurgists of La Louvière:

"Come and stay a while with us?"

But Gilbert thanked them and answered:

"I cannot; I am going back with Hourmel, and after that I have my own country which I must see again."

The whole of the night preceding the "November Easter" he had thought over what he must do.

XIV.

THE RETURN.

HE left Faÿt-Manage on Tuesday in the afternoon, in company with the butcher of Quiévrain. On foot, side by side, they travelled again the road from Faÿt to La Louvière. Gilbert was silent. He asked himself if the joy which he felt did not come from the companionship of the Belgian missionaries and workmen, from the park and the chanting, from the presence of these things and their novelty. But no; as he went away, he felt that the peace was within himself, and living. At La Louvière, they took the railway train. The light was fading, although it was not late. It was cold; it was cloudy. The roadsides, planted with trees, the fields, sowed or ploughed, bordered with houses, the knolls of the coal-mines, the hamlets where twenty factory chimneys smoked above the sprouting wheat—all these passed by, and yet his contentment did not pass. Pressed close against each other, the collars of their jackets turned up, silk handkerchiefs around their necks, the two men, seated upon the same bench, watched the fleeing landscape as it was swallowed up in the shadow. The butcher named the villages, the people, and the farms. He had returned to his

every-day thoughts. Not so Gilbert. With his arms crossed, he pressed his thin garment and covering closely against himself, and he did so undoubtedly to protect himself from the cold, but also secretly, to hold within bounds a certain young voice, which longed to speak, to cry out, to break loose; and which was his happy soul. And not being accustomed to it, he was astonished at this joy which lasted.

"Well," said the butcher, when they had arrived at his house at Quiévrain, "I think that you have changed your mind and that you will stay at least until to-morrow?"

"I cannot, even with you; I must go back to my country. I wished never to see it again, because I suffered there. Now, do you know why I am no longer afraid to return there?"

"I can imagine that," answered the tranquil Belgian.

"You can imagine it because you have always been as I am now. But I am astonished at what I am doing. I return to my people because I have no longer the same heart; sorrow makes no difference to me."

And as Hourmel insisted on keeping his friend, Gilbert said:

"My strength has grown, but I begin to grow old, and I think that I shall die a poor man."

This he said in the presence of Hourmel's wife who, attentive and moved, was holding a lighted lamp before the faces of the two travellers. She would have liked to know what had happened. Yet when she heard Gilbert speak, she did not

ask any question. She said, letting all her soul be seen in her worn, transparent face:

"Husband, we must not hold back those who are going to their duty. There are too few of them. Monsieur Cloquet will leave us after he has had a glass of beer."

After the two men had touched their glasses together, Gilbert bade farewell to the butcher and to Madame Hourmel. And, all alone, he plunged between the houses of Quiévrain toward the frontier of France and toward his new destiny.

The train soon carried him to Onnaing. Then Gilbert was seized with anguish. He was about to see again the farm of Pain-Fendu. Until then, this thought had only passed swiftly through his mind between two long moments of calm, like a shower. Now it did not leave him. Must he not go in, settle his accounts, and get the few clothes left in the loft? He took the street which went by the church. In the factories the furnace fires were extinguished. At the doorways, children were eating a piece of bread before going to bed; men were standing, breathing in the night air after so many hours in the workshops; they were illumined by the lamps within, and their garments, weary like themselves, hung in soft folds along their bodies. Gilbert, in passing, envied them because they had a shelter. A great wave of pity for himself tempted him and said to him: "Yield to me." When he reached the plain and knew from the gigantic shadow which it made in the desert of the fallow land that the farm lay before him, he was afraid. "It is not Heilman, however,

whom I fear," he thought. "If he wishes to beat me, I will let myself be beaten for the first time in my life. I have deserved it." No, he was afraid of himself, of a desire which he felt stirring and growing in his heart, that of finding himself near the wife of the foreman and of saying good-by to her. "Oh! Only for a moment. I would ask her pardon. I would tell her that I am all changed!" He made a great effort not to listen to these voices which troubled him, and he strove to think, as he walked along, of his oxen, and of each of the objects which he had brought from Nièvre and which he must soon pack up. The dark walls rose before him; the gables of the stables, the sheepfolds, the house, the barn, already detached themselves vaguely the one from the other in the night which had grown milky and chill. And he still felt, in the depths of his heart, the growing of this voluptuous desire of which he had emptied his soul but which sprang up again.

At this hour the servants would have finished supper. Some of them were, doubtless, smoking or chatting before the great gate. Gilbert did not go as far as that. Cutting across the fields he turned toward a small gate, opening into the enclosure of Pain-Fendu, on the side of Onnaing. Luckily it was not locked. He had only to lift up the wooden panel, using a stone as a lever, and the gate turned on its hinges. The orchard was deserted and so was the long passage which bordered the warehouses, the forge, and the first cowsheds. Gilbert on reaching the back of the court saw only a single man by the bed of manure where

the Picardy cattle were sleeping; a day-labourer, who did not recognize the silhouette of the Nivernais, and who kept on putting the beet pulp into the feeding troughs. He hid himself for a moment behind the corner post of the shed. Heilman's voice could be heard in the dining-room and then in the corridor. The foreman appeared upon the threshold. Gilbert saw him shake the hand of a servant who, having finished his supper, was going back to the village. He went forward rapidly, crossed the court and mounted the steps of the stairway.

"Monsieur Heilman?"

The latter had opened the door of the dining-room, but he bent back, turning his head in the direction of the passage from whence the voice came. His eyes, already reaccustomed to the light of the lamp, made an effort to adapt themselves to the shadow.

"Ah! It is you, Cloquet? Enter!"

Gilbert felt weak. He went up the steps; he entered, and at first looked around him. Madame Heilman was not in the dining-room where she had, as usual, just put everything in order. The bright lamp was upon the table, the chairs were ranged along the wall and the coffee pot stood near the extinguished fire, ready for the next morning's coffee. Heilman remained standing, leaning against the high end of the table, and facing the door. He looked disdainfully and distrustfully at this stray drover who came back, no doubt, to ask for work after his spree. He had seen many of them before, these adventur-

ers, crossing frontiers, coming from the West or the East, drunkards or debauchees, wanderers in any case. He had seen too many to get angry with them. He waited several moments, surprised that Gilbert did not excuse himself.

"You have given a fine example!" he said. "A four days' spree and I took you for a steady workman! My wife, indeed, said to me: 'He will do something rash!' She could not understand it, on Saturday evening, when you went away. But you are like the others, without interest in your work. Where have you been?"

Gilbert made a vague gesture:

"I have seen a great deal of the country," he said.

"And now you would like to come back? I understand that; but I must warn you. I have replaced you, I have hired a young man who was passing, some one probably who is no better than you. The kind one picks up in these days."

"No, I do not ask to be taken back; I am going home."

"Ah! That's good! I will pay you, then. Monsieur Walmery will reimburse me."

The foreman opened one of the cupboards and came back with his hand plunged in a linen bag of which he had untied the string. He clicked upon the table, one by one, the pieces of gold—"one hundred francs, hundred and twenty, hundred and forty, that makes up the sum and generously?"

"Yes."

"Now, my man, I have a letter for you. It came at noon."

He opened the table drawer and drew out the

letter. Gilbert recognized the post mark of Fonteneilles. He left the pieces of gold upon the table, took the letter, and tore open the envelope. He had not read two lines, when his eyes filled with tears.

"Ah! *Mon Dieu!*" he said, "Monsieur Michel is dead!"

He stopped reading. His arms fell at his sides. The tears rolled down his cheeks and his beard and he did not dry them, and he did not hide his face.

"He died on Sunday. It is Étienne Justamond who sends me word. My friend is dead!"

Heilman, although little sensitive to the sorrows of others, was touched by this grief.

"Who was he, then? One of your relations?"

"No."

"He was not your master?"

"I have none. He was a noble, Monsieur Heilman. I had mowed for his father, and then for him. He loved us, he talked with me; he would have changed the country."

He counted upon his fingers:

"Five hours from here to Paris, then six or seven. I shall arrive, perhaps, too late for the funeral."

Heilman shook his head to give more importance to his reply. He admired in the bottom of his heart this passer-by, and he regretted him.

"You are a curious man, Gilbert. You are the first one whom I ever heard speak in this way. Listen, there might, perhaps, be a way to arrange."

"What? Is there a train at once?"

"I know nothing about that, and that is not what I want to say. No, Cloquet, but I might be able to keep you."

Gilbert raised his arms as if he were coming out of a dream.

"No! No! You must not propose that to me. I might accept it. Let me go."

He approached, swept up the gold with his two hands, and thrust it in his pocket. At this moment, the door which led from the dining-room into the room of Heilman opened. A woman appeared in the half opening, her head partly turned toward some one following her who was speaking to her.

"Gilbert!" called Heilman. "Gilbert! At least come and say good-by to your mistress?"

But Gilbert had disappeared. He fled. He was already in the court. He reached the shed and disappeared in the darkness. Heilman would have followed him and called him back but his wife stopped him. She had the wise speech to which men yield.

"Let him go," she said. "You do not know him well; he is a man who has had many griefs."

Gilbert had entered the cow-shed. In an instant he had folded the clothes which he had left in the corner of the loft. He fastened the package with a leather belt, and threw it on his back. Then he took his stick. Passing behind his six great oxen, who were eating at the rack, he slackened his step.

"Adieu, my oxen! Work well with the other man. I am going back home."

One of the oxen gave a short bellow.

"He answers me," said the drover.

He had recognized Griveau, who had a deep voice, and short breath. And he continued his way swiftly, recrossing the orchard to the little open gate in the wall of the enclosure.

He was soon upon the drenched fallow lands and then upon the road which leads to Onnaing. The fields were level and bare. The village slept. There were still some trails of smoke, blacker than the shadow and beaten down by the east wind. The man no longer thought of the farm which he was leaving. All his imagination and all his heart were in Nièvre. He groaned, he repeated:

"Monsieur Michel I shall never see again! My friend is dead!" When he reached the station, he asked:

"I wish to go to Fonteneilles, which is in Nièvre. Will I be there to-morrow morning?"

"Train 2916 passes in a few moments. Get your ticket for Paris. At Paris, they will tell you, if they know where your place is."

Gilbert got into a compartment where there was only one other traveller. He stretched himself out on the seat, his bundle of clothes under his head, and he closed his eyes, but sleep did not come to him. Gilbert continued to think of the next day, and the work and the trouble of the days to come. And at last he said:

"I shall live my new life as if Monsieur Michel saw me."

XV.

THE PASSING OF THE MASTER.

MICHEL DE MEXIMIEU died, almost suddenly, on Sunday night. The news ran over the country faster than a galloping horse. "Monsieur de Fonteneilles is dead. The old one? No, the young. It is a pity; he was the better of the two; he was not proud." Monday and Tuesday, at the angelus, morning and evening, the bells of Fonteneilles rang for a long time to announce the death. All the forest trees, all the underbrush, all the thickets on the hills shivered at the passage of their voice, and a few souls who had loved Michel de Meximieu shivered also. For twenty-four hours the château remained entirely closed, empty and dumb. Then they began to transform the vestibule into a chapel for the dead to lie in state. An unwonted animation broke the silence of the avenue, of the court, and of the neighbouring barns. At the summons of the Marquis, who arrived Monday evening, the workmen of the country and the employees of Corbigny flocked there. The noise of saws and hammers rose round the walls. Curiosity, a little human pity, and a little regret were roused at the same time. The carriages from neighbouring châteaux came down the avenue; peasants came, only a few at first,

and then more, emboldened by numbers, "to give the holy water": others, who did not enter, uncovered themselves before the door and wandered around for a moment in the grounds which death had opened to all.

They met the Marquis here and there. He superintended every detail; gave orders, and ruled at Fonteneilles for the first time; greeted from a distance, respected, obeyed at his slightest word. His grief had reëstablished him in authority and almost in friendship. He said: "Madame de Meximieu was unable to come; she is crushed; pity her." Sorrow inspired him with phrases not in his usual manner, which the hearts of all men understood. They thought: "How he suffers, to be gentle like that!" The names of the farmers, the farm servants, of the shepherds, at least of the oldest, he remembered as well as those of his own cavalrymen. "Méhaut, my friend, go and open the family vault; do whatever is necessary; I do not want strange hands to touch the resting place of our dead. He would not have allowed it. Go, my friend, I know that all will be well done." Again he said: "Monsieur l'Abbé, I shall be grateful to you all my life for having been with him at his last hour. You took my place, without doubt, better than I could have done; you understood him better. We were so different, he and I! Education, occupations, ideals even. Ah! Monsieur l'Abbé, I suffer for not having known my son. I have suffered for a long time on account of these differences, but I did not fathom them until after his death. It is

he who was right. And now we are separated forever—after having been strangers to each other all our lives."

Wednesday at dawn, Renard and the sacristan, the cart-wright and the farrier of Fonteneilles finished nailing in the interior of the church and before the door which opens upon the cemetery the long black draperies, sewed with those tears which are the image of so many others and which do not fall. The parish had only old, very short hangings; they had sent to Corbigny to get all the funeral material of the best quality. The men made haste, aided by the village workmen. They opened cases of tapers; they erected, at the entrance of the truncated nave, a catafalque higher than the people of the hamlet had ever seen, "so splendid, with feathers at the corners." The merchants' wagons which went up the slope on a walk, stopped; children, old women, and young mothers with their little ones by the hand, stood around the wall of the cemetery, chattering, and at times drew near the door, to look in. An odour of stuff, such as floats from draper's shops, of wax and of mustiness, filled the old church and made the air heavy.

The hour had come. In the great sandy court before the château, a large crowd assembled. It made two moving masses: one to the right, at the entrance of the avenue, the other, the largest, on the side of the common. They were the men from Fonteneilles, from the neighbouring hamlets, from Corbigny and elsewhere, workmen, day-

labourers, artisans, small landed proprietors, merchants and among them there was a sprinkling of women, veiled in mourning, or dressed in the *canette* of their grandmothers. They talked in a low tone. The confused noise of voices grew loud by starts and then again died away almost entirely. In the space left the carriages moved at a walk; they stopped before the château, and then ranged themselves in line in front of the stables half hidden by a clump of trees. They were of all fashions and of all epochs, automobiles or landaus bringing relations or friends of the Meximieus, the cab of the notary, the tilbury of a business man, jaunting cars or English carts of the large farmers of the region, hacks hired by the travellers at some near-by station. "That is a carriage from Touchevier of Saint-Saulge; that one from the hotel de la Poste, that one from Monsieur Cahouet of Corbigny. Ah! there is Monsieur Honoré Fortier." The farmer of La Vigie came on foot, wearing a silk hat, very alert still and ruddy in spite of his age, scarcely opening his thin lips to reply to the greetings murmured on all sides, those lips closed since childhood by the secretiveness of the peasant. "Do you know that fat man who is passing? He is the wood merchant of Saint-Imbert. Have you seen Monsieur Jacquemin? No, nor Mademoiselle Antoinette." Their eyes followed the carriages; people pushed each other forward to see better, trying to distinguish the faces behind the raised panes of the coach doors, to surprise words, gestures, the faces of the newcomers who en-

tered the château through the door hung with black, behind which vague shadows moved. The crowd increased continually. Few peasants went down the avenue. They came in small groups, from the woods and the fields, along the fences made of tree branches and the paths, avoiding the open spaces where they would be exposed to the fire of so many eyes. The court was as crowded as the square on a market day. At nine o'clock there arose a great commotion. All heads turned in the same direction. Abbé Roubiaux, preceded by the "cross of gold" draped with crêpe and with a group of choristers, was seen at the top of the avenue. Behind him came the hearse from Corbigny. It was the second time that "the town hearse" had come into the country of Fonteneilles. The first time it came to bear away the body of a stout lady, who had begun life by being a nurse in Paris, and who had returned to her native place to die, having become very rich, no one knew how. But it was not the same carriage; there were not the two caparisoned, plumed horses, or the carriage covered with black and trimmed with silver; no, it was quite a different thing.

"What a poor hearse!"

"For a Count, too!"

"It would be good enough for people like us, common people, as they call us."

"Only one horse!"

"And not a fine one. You can count his ribs. His tail is not even combed out."

"Do you understand why?"

"No. Perhaps the Mayor of Corbigny was not willing to let the big hearse go out."

"Politics, then?"

"Who can tell? A noble, with only one horse for his funeral, that is something I never saw before. There is enough money in that house, too! More than thirty thousand francs, that the Marquis got from the sale of his woods!"

"You are all wrong! Renard, the guard, has just told me the reason!"

Thirty persons gathered around the man who knew.

"Well?"

"It appears that the Count made a will. He asked for the first class at the church, and the fourth to carry him there."

"He wanted the priests to make the most."

"Do you know what astonishes me? It is that he did not ask to be carried by the men of his farm."

"Perhaps he did not wish to tire them. He was capable of thinking of that."

"Perhaps."

Abbé Roubiaux recited the prayers and the words floated above the assembly and by their power of discipline silenced the noise. Heads were uncovered. Suddenly there came an absolute, touching silence, the result of poignant emotion. The carriage took up its march, and in the framework of the doorway, through which his son, lying in his bier, had just passed, the father appeared, magnificent and sorrowful, grown white in four days, his face uplifted, the glance of his blue eyes fixed

before him upon the wreaths of chrysanthemums and autumn roses laid on the top of the funeral car, his frock coat closely buttoned—on it, above his heart, a red point shone clearly—his silk hat held in his ungloved right hand, his left hand gloved, hanging motionless. Everybody looked at him. He saw no one. He walked with a military bearing and seemed like one advancing to the sound of a fanfare which chants the mourning of the entire world. His reputation for courage and wealth, his rank and his years gave him importance; and grief added its consecration. Many men felt tears springing to their eyes, and the worst enemies of the château found this nobleman very brave and very worthy of pity. He walked slowly, dominating the crowd, his white beard and his moustaches alone trembling in the wind.

All the friends, the neighbours, the clients, and the whole country follow. At the end of the avenue of beech trees, the small, sorry-looking horse which dragged the hearse turned to the left, and the body of Michel, late Comte de Meximieu, left forever his beloved land of Fonteneilles.

At that point a man joined the procession. It was Monsieur Jacquemin. He did not wish to enter before the time into the domain which was now his. The bells tolled. The forest trees in the background grew smaller. And before the first houses of the hamlet, upon the square, in the cemetery, and on the terrace which surrounds the tower of the church, many women and men also waited for the passage of the long procession.

When the nave, the two arms of the transept, and the choir, were crowded with people, the walls on every side rubbed by the people's shoulders, the service began. The flames of the wax tapers did not dissipate the shadows gathered by the hangings. They shone like sparks arrested in their flight and nailed on the darkness. The officiating priest stood near the communion table. In the central aisle, between the benches, a new procession was formed, that of the men and women who had known the dead man, and who, to honour him, were going "to the offertory." Abbé Roubiaux looked at these parishioners whom death and not God had brought to the church. "She is their mistress," he thought, "she raises the cross again above them." They came in two ranks; they kissed the silver crucifix; lips differing greatly in respect and love, sluggish, disdainful and unaccustomed lips; lips which, at all times, blasphemed, but did not dare at this moment to refuse the traditional gesture; lips of old women who pressed the metal at the pierced feet of Christ, and seemed to wish to devour it. And all, both the men and women of Fonteneilles, after kissing the crucifix, placed one sou or two sous in the tray which a chorister standing near the officiating priest held out to them. The rich and the poor filed past. The poor had taken the money for the offering not from their pocket, but from another tray, upon which was heaped a mass of copper coins, which the guard of Fonteneilles, watching carefully the people who took, held by the side of the holy water font. All the parish

had known Michel, and nearly all gave for the repose of his soul, because their ancestors had believed, had loved and had hoped fraternally.

Another priest of the district had replaced Abbé Roubiaux at the offertory, and the procession went on, and the dry sound of the sous dropping upon the platter, sometimes the sound of a kiss, were mingled with the chants for the dead, the appeals for mercy, and the promises of resurrection and eternity.

The General, standing in the first row to the left, moved only an arm, which he raised now and then to the height of his eyes.

And when the mass was finished and the absolution given, the father went out, recrossing the nave. He took his place on the top step of the church portal, his back to the flight of steps, in the full light, replying with a sign of his head to all the congregation who passed near him. He did not hear the words which they addressed to him: "General, I pity you; General, I shall not forget him." He waited. He looked repeatedly at the coffin placed there before him, upon the edge of the path which crossed the cemetery to the most frequented and the most honourable place near a large raised slab of marble, marked with a cross and bearing the inscription: "*N'a failli Meximieu.*" Six workmen of Fonteneilles had borne the body to the threshold of this dwelling, which it was to enter, the last but one of his name and last hope of his race. The six men were fine looking and thoughtful, affected by the place and by the apparatus of the things of death, and

by the glance of the General, which they imagined to be resting upon them. Again chants were raised; a benediction descended upon the coffin. The cemetery was crowded; there were men, children, and women between all the tombs and even upon the wall of the enclosure. And the gray sunlight appeared and disappeared, covered by the passing mists.

Then, when the priest had finished the prayers and reëntered the church, from the top of the steps the father extended his arm. A second time silence fell upon the vast crowd. "People of Fonteneilles," said he, "my family is ended; my son is dead; me, you will see no more! During four hundred years, the Meximieus have lived with your fathers. I constitute you the guardians of the tomb of this child, and of my ancestors who sleep here. When you pass, let those who still know how to pray, pray for my son. He loved you. You did not understand him, not entirely. I have no right to reproach you, for no more did I, until recently, know what he was worth. He was better than we are. You will learn from your priest that he died thinking of you. I have not the strength to speak of these things. I say to you only; he was a brave man; do not forget it. Try also to be more just toward those who will take his place upon the land of Fonteneilles. I leave you. But I beg the poor to allow me to give them myself these tickets for the distribution of bread. Come my friends! And to all the others, adieu!"

Murmured words replied, here and there:

"Has he made a donation to the board of

charity? Or could it be a hospital which he had given for Fonteneilles? But no, he had not even his lawful portion, Monsieur Michel. He lived on the property of his parents."

The guard came up with a package of bread tickets, each one for twelve pounds on the baker of the hamlet. The Marquis went down to the last step, that which touched the ground, uneven and hollowed here into a shell by the feet of the faithful of all ages. The poor came, arranging themselves in a procession, the lame, the knock-kneed, the humpbacked, the old of the village or of the neighbouring villages, rovers of the forest, old women in black mantles like nuns, mothers who dragged a group of children after them. And to each one the old Marquis gave twenty-four pounds of bread. "In memory of Michel de Meximieu!" he said. The procession was long; the Marquis, firm as he was, closed at times his eyes to keep himself from weeping; the people said to each other: "It is true that he was a good man, Monsieur Michel; we would perhaps have understood each other in the end." Again they said: "They are going to sell Fonteneilles now. The Marquis has no longer the courage to return, and he is selling his land. For he has no need of money, he is worth millions."

"In memory of Michel de Meximieu," repeated the Marquis upon the lowest step of the church.

Near the tomb a young girl, kneeling in the grass, bowed and overwhelmed by her grief and indifferent to all the rest, was weeping. They had not seen her come. She was there. The women

especially were moved with pity and said: "It must be that she loved him, the poor little one! What a fine couple they would have made, and kind to the poor!"

There were still left to be served a dozen poor, who made a file of some yards long to the right of the Marquis, when a man, arriving by the road and pushing through the groups which were beginning to go down, came up the steps of the cemetery. As he was a tall man, the whole assembly saw him. A great murmur arose: "Gilbert Cloquet, back from the Picards! Look at him! His beard has grown white, but he looks well all the same! Where is he going? He is passing between the tombs. Perhaps he wants to speak to the Marquis?"

He did want, in fact, to speak to Monsieur de Meximieu, and, thinking it scarcely polite to address him in front and to disturb the distribution, he gained the part of the enclosure where the procession of the collectors of bread which was now finishing had formed. He took his place in the last rank, behind a woman who was dragging a child, and he waited his turn, treading like her upon the grass. People noticed him. He, his head erect, and his beard motionless upon his closely buttoned jacket, had only eyes for this grand old noble, who stooped rhythmically and who said so sadly: "In memory of Michel de Meximieu." They were soon face to face. The master of Fonteneilles, whose sight was blurred by his tears, did not recognize the reaper of his meadows, and extended to him a slip of paper

upon which were two written lines. But Gilbert said, very low, so as not to offend him:

"I am not yet in need, Monsieur Philippe; I only wanted to speak two words to you."

"Ah! It is you, my poor Cloquet! Come up to my side to tell me the two things; I hear you badly."

When the two men were standing upon the same step of the flight, all the crowd thought: "He is as tall as the Marquis, and even a little more so to-day, because the Marquis bears too much sorrow."

"I want to tell you that I loved Monsieur Michel well, that I shall always keep him in my thoughts. I have come from farther than Paris to do him honour."

General de Meximieu grasped the hands of Cloquet, and pressed them.

Cloquet continued:

"You are going away, Monsieur Philippe. Do not be troubled about the flowers. I remain, and I will watch over him. During my life, I will put flowers on his grave."

A sob answered him, then the words:

"I trust you to do it."

And Gilbert Cloquet withdrew and disappeared in the crowd. Then General de Meximieu descended the steps and went down the narrow path on whose edge were the coffin, the wreaths, and the grave-digger stupefied with wine and who seemed sad. Suddenly a silence of pity fell upon the cemetery, the road, and the square. Even those who could see nothing were silent. Antoinette Jacquemin was no longer there. The

General stopped, inclined his head and made the sign of the cross; then, instinctively, by force of habit, or perhaps for some secret reason, at the moment of turning away he again carried his hand to his forehead and gave a military salute. Straightening himself to his full height, he went on his way.

He walked very swiftly. He fled. People separated before him.

He crossed the square, replying to the greetings with a feverish hand which touched the brim of his hat. Two notaries followed him, some guards, and some wood or land merchants, but he held up his head and spoke to no one. The path went down. The avenue opened before him. The Marquis, without halting, raised his eyes toward the edge of the forest which surrounded the walls in a fair half circle. The anguish which seized his heart was like that which he had felt upon the battle-fields in 1870. A whole race had been mowed down; four hundred years of memories and of friendships were about to be blotted out, and the last of those estates which had stood as gems in the crown of the Marquis de Meximieu, he, he had sold it. The windows were closed; they would remain thus until the new master opened them on the new era. The shadow alone belonged still to the old master, his sign, his mark, the mourning over everything. He entered, making a sign to the importunate to wait. In the vestibule was a package of letters, cards, and dispatches. Among them was an official telegram brought within an hour. The General opened it

and made a gesture of anger. "In truth, they might have gotten along without me! Have they never suffered, those people!" It was an imperative recall to Paris, on account of a strike which had just broken out. The Minister ordered: "Take the first train, I need you." The Marquis de Meximieu was alone in the vestibule of the château. He tore the paper and crumpled up the pieces, which he threw on the tiled floor. "So much the worse! I shall not go!" He had promised himself to go through for the last time the bedrooms, the drawing-rooms, and the cluttered attics of Fonteneilles; to receive the farmers; and to point out to Renard the objects that must be sent at once to Paris. There were sacred souvenirs. Madame de Meximieu had made him promise to bring back several himself. "This, and again this which you will find in his room, or in the smoking-room." He would do it. And, in fact, he called the guard and walked toward the stairway. But, at the moment of going up the first step, he halted; he passed his hand over his forehead as if to put aside a feeling of faintness.

"No," he said, "my duty as a soldier is at Paris. I must go!"

He reappeared outside, leaving the door open, and said to Renard who was hurrying toward him.

"Bring the auto."

When the machine was in front of the door:

"Gentlemen," he said to the group of men who were waiting for him, "I will forward to you my instructions from Paris. I am compelled to leave. A matter of duty. Adieu!"

And, throwing himself into the carriage, without looking back, he said to the chauffeur:

"Sixty kilometres an hour, Edward, we will catch the express for Paris at La Charité."

At the moment when the automobile turned the corner of the avenue and launched itself at full speed upon the road to Laché, the sound of its horn passed over the woods and over the village of Fonteneilles. It was the last adieu of a race. The women had gone back to their houses. Many men had remained on the square before the church, or gone into the public houses. Gilbert Cloquet was talking before the door of the café Blanquaire in the midst of some two score of them. He interrupted himself in the narrative of his travels, and all listened to the sound of the horn which was going away and steadily growing less, like the sparks of a rocket. Neither the enemies, nor the friends of the château made the least observation; the same serious thought restrained them, a common feeling of the instability of human things changed their silence into secret homage. It was only for a moment. Then a worn voice, that of Lamprière, asked:

"See here, Cloquet, will you pay a round? When one comes back home, one treats."

"That is true," cried the day-labourer. "I am willing!"

"And then, you know, that won't keep you from telling about your trip; and in Blanquaire's we will be more comfortable than we are outside; there is a nasty fog."

Cloquet raised his head. Enormous, heavy

clouds were drifting past, tossed by the wind, and spitting down a frozen mist of rain.

"They come from the country which I have just left," he said, "where the people are better than their rain. Come on, who will follow me?"

He entered Blanquaire's, and most of the men, who considered themselves invited by the glance which Cloquet cast around the circle, entered also. Several came out of the neighbouring houses, or left the shelter of the church wall. The long room of the café was filled with the uproar of voices and with the grating of the heavy nailed shoes on the tiles, and soon there were scarcely three or four stools vacant around the wooden tables, which were placed in double rows from the door to the rear of the room. All the comrades of the forest were there; Ravoux, who had gone into the café while the Marquis de Meximieu was still speaking, as a kind of protest; Supiat Gueule-de-Renard, who arrived at the last moment, and entered without invitation, with his restless eyes and sneering mouth; Durgé, the one who broke the first mowing machine of Fonteneilles; Gandhon, the former cuirassier; Trépard, the huge wagoner who never laughed except at the end of wedding feasts; Méhaut, Justamond, Lamprière, and others who, like them, were grown men; there were also a small number of very young workmen, whose youth drew them together and who called to each other out of the tumultuous crowd of the older men: "Étienne Justamond! Jean-Jean! This way! I have a place for you!" During several moments the hall of the café Blanquaire was

like the hall of an inn, taken by assault on a fair day, by sellers and merchants shouting there as they do without, in a hurry to drink, spending through pride, masters of the public room and the surroundings, of the wine and the landlord whom they are able to pay and who must laugh. There were the same cries, the same teasing words to the two daughters of Blanquaire who brought the bottles and defended themselves carelessly, just as if used to it; the same hits about the skill of the coffee-house keeper, the same noise of corks popping and of glasses clinking against each other. But very quickly it was evident that one ruling thought, a common curiosity, excited all these men grouped in fours around the tables. Hands pointed out Gilbert Cloquet; heads were turned toward him. He had seated himself toward the centre of the room, near the right wall, and there was only one man beside him, quite a young one, Jean-Jean, the whistler of Montreuillon, who had taken his place at the upper end of the table. Gilbert, his arms crossed by the side of his full glass, looked at his old comrades whom he saw again after several months of absence; he felt that he was observed, and he also observed them, attentively, silently, like an old pilot who has a head wind. Sometimes with a nod of the head, he answered a comrade's good-evening. A voice from the back of the room said:

"It seems that his opinions have changed. They say that he is no longer one of us."

He kept quiet, but he raised his head a little to see who was speaking. It was Ravoux, seated

in the back of the room, the centre of a compact group. Another voice, vehement and loud, replied from the other end of the café, near the door:

"He does not hide it. You saw him speaking to the nobleman just now. And a few minutes ago, he said that the Belgians were better than the lads of Nièvre."

A murmur rose; forms which were leaning over stiffened up; and astonished, suspicious, or irritated, questioned Gilbert Cloquet with their eyes while the glasses were placed upon the tables.

He did not budge any more than a column. Some of his neighbours, who were not very near him, shoved back their stools. Supiat's bantering voice went on:

"All the same, we must know what to count on. The season is beginning in the forest. We cannot have traitors among us."

Protestations interrupted him:

"He is not one! Cloquet, say that you are not one?"

"I saw the way he spoke on the square, and the way he saluted the church," continued Supiat, "and I tell you that Gilbert Cloquet here has become something like a clerical. I would not swear that, among the Picards, they have not made him take the sacrament!"

The sixty drinkers looked at Gilbert Cloquet. He lifted his hat tranquilly and said:

"I have done so."

The men all rose. The wrath of their gestures and their voices filled the room. They threatened him with their arms; they called to each

other from one table to another, from the window to the door, from the rear of the room to the entrance. Many of the men cried: "Down with Cloquet! Down with the skull-caps!" Others shouted: "He is free! We are free!" Overturned stools fell upon the tiled floor. Supiat whistled in a key. A formidable blow from a fist, which made the glasses and bottles jump, brought a half silence, and the deep-chested voice, the voice which Ravoux, the president, used at public reunions, proclaimed:

"Let him explain! We will judge him, comrades. Listen to him!"

They saw then that Cloquet was also standing with his shoulders braced against the wall, that his look was calm and that his arms were crossed.

"It is true," he said, "I have seen over there comrades who loved each other better than we do, and who lived better lives than ours. I might have seen the same thing in France; but as for me, I have seen it on the other side of the frontier."

"No! No! Don't let him speak! Out of the union, Cloquet! Put it to vote now, Ravoux; there is a quorum!"

"Not yet!" cried Ravoux. "Let him speak!"

"Not yet," returned Cloquet, "I am blaming no one! My heart has not changed for the worse, on the contrary; but I have seen that we do not have real life, and I have come back to tell you where it is. I will tell you once, twice, ten times, just as long as I am alive. No one shall stop me! I want to stay with you. The justice that I used to long

for, I long for still, but I know now that it is more beautiful than I ever imagined. And I follow it."

"Follow it alone! Enough! Put him out! Bravo, Cloquet! No! Put him out!"

"Come, then, and put me out!"

"We are coming!"

In the increasing tumult, which Ravoux failed to quiet by blows of his fist on the table, three men, jumping over a table, ran toward Cloquet; Tournabien, with his cat's face, Le Dévoré, and Lampriére, completely drunk. A human wave dragged along by them surged to the middle of the room, spreading out in a half circle. But at the moment when Cloquet, surrounded at a distance, was preparing to defend himself, and was unfolding his arms, the assailants and the curious, the secret friends and the open enemies stopped, and became suddenly silent. A new sight confounded them all with the same amazement. A man had ranged himself along the wall at Gilbert's side. Youth illumined him. He smiled. He was slender and smaller than the tall Gilbert; he looked up to him from his feet to his head with affection as a younger brother looks at an older one, and he said, in the silence, without paying attention to the clenched fists:

"Monsieur Cloquet, I am on your side!"

Cloquet smiled with satisfaction, and showed his white teeth.

"Ah, Jean-Jean, little wood-cutter of Montreuillon, you have a heart such as few have; but do not take my part so quickly, betray me rather; they might do you harm."

The little man turned toward the excited mob. "They are not all against you."

And, to show that he was right, two others, who were about his age, making a way with their elbows, stepped out of the ranks. They came through some instinct, because a word of honour or of friendship had touched them; they took sides for the weak and for the unknown God; they were pale, and one was fair-haired, ruddy and freckled, and the other, his chest still narrow but limbed like a cuirassier, had on his chin the curly shavings of a brown beard. Their eyes were quivering with restrained anger.

"You, too, Étienne Justamond?" said Cloquet. "You, too, Victor Méhaut? Ah! there are brave men everywhere!"

And when the three young men were by his side framing him, one on his right, two on his left, he began to laugh aloud to keep himself from crying; he reached out his arms, and placed them upon the friendly shoulders, and he cried, and his voice drowned the murmur of the room:

"Turn me out of the union if you want to, comrades, this is my union! Is it not fine? Nothing but young oaks!"

"No joking, Cloquet! No one is expelling you; you are free! Come back, comrades, and take up your glasses again!"

Ravoux interfered, Ravoux had felt afraid; he felt that these young men acted in a new way and had a certain disquieting look in their faces, like that of dogs without a collar. Being an experienced man, he saw that a party of the wood-

cutters secretly admired Gilbert Cloquet; he had guessed the ruling opinion and he spoke with authority as usual; his pale, hairy hands pushed aside the men and broke the circle made around Cloquet by Jean-Jean, Étienne Justamond, and Victor Méhaut.

"I like that better," said Cloquet. "Come on! my boys, take up your glasses. Unclinch your fists. I will call upon you, if I have need of you."

He remained standing, while the men seated themselves gradually around the tables. He called Blanquaire, paid for the drinks of all who were there, and then, raising his glass filled to the brim with Narbonne wine, he emptied it at a single draught.

"Adieu, comrades and friends! I must go and see my house where I have not yet been."

He made a sweeping gesture with his hands, as if to scatter his adieu over the crowd. Several men cried: "*Vive* Cloquet! Thanks Cloquet!" others with a movement of their head or their eyes gave him to understand: "I am with you, in my heart." Others appeared to hear and to see nothing. He crossed the hall, slowly, halted for an instant on the threshold, to show clearly that he was not running away, and went out into the street.

The noise of the dispute, the acclamations, the outbursts of voices had roused the curiosity of the neighbours of the café Blanquaire. When Gilbert Cloquet raised his head to see whether the weather had improved, he noticed faces behind all the low window-panes of the houses; he even

saw, at the high window of the rectory, quite near the café, Abbé Roubiaux leaning out, disturbed, and wondering to himself: "Have they killed some one?"

"I am not yet dead, Monsieur le Curé," he said. "And even if you should wish to read me a little sermon, I have something to tell to you!"

The abbé, bare-headed, came out through the latticed door and began to walk beside Gilbert, in the direction of the forest and of Pas-du-Loup. But the day-labourer did not tell him any important news. It was rather he who asked questions and made the abbé tell him about the last weeks of Michel de Meximieu's life. At the place where the path separates from the road, far from the houses, far from ears which lie in wait for words:

"Monsieur le Curé," said Cloquet, stopping, "you must not go any farther. It is a great deal to have made you come so far without telling you the news. But I did not wish to be spied upon. Monsieur le Curé, whom do you think you have before you?"

"Gilbert Cloquet, the wood-cutter."

"No, it is another man; I am converted."

"What do you mean?"

"Converted thoroughly, heart, body and spirit. But you have not done this work. The Belgians did it."

Rapidly, he told the story of his stay in the country of the Picards and how he had been led, almost without wishing it, to follow the butcher of Quiévrain. He talked without taking his eyes

off Abbé Roubiaux, with a clear, satisfied, friendly glance, which meant: "You see, indeed, that I do not lie. I am not the same man who turned away when you passed, or who did not understand." The abbé did not always look at Gilbert; at times, he raised his eyes above his friend, above the earth, as Christ does in the paintings, when he is going to bless the bread. And each time his eyes came back from above, all glistening and suffused with new tears. At last he said:

"I have worked, I also, during the time of your absence; and you will see on Sunday, that several have listened to me. But I am still much alone, Gilbert; you will help me, will you not?"

"What a question! No one believes for himself alone, Monsieur l'Abbé! When I have had anything good, I have always shared it."

"What a misfortune for us was Monsieur Michel's death!"

"Yes, you may well say that. You, he, and I, we were like a Trinity. But just we two together, Monsieur le Curé, we are very strong, because people respect us."

"And have you thought what you will do?"

"Yes, I will act as I did on the night before the sale at Épine. There was a horse here, a cow there, another somewhere else, some sheep in the stubble field, and I brought them all home!"

He made a gesture as he used to do in the public meetings, and his voice rose:

"And then, you know, I am staying in the union. Old Gilbert is a comrade as before."

"You do well!"

"Even if you did not say so, I would think so just the same. Only, Monsieur le Curé——"

He bent down and he lowered his voice, because he was talking in confidence.

"Only, you will have to be like the priests of the country of the Picards. They are friendly to the poor people."

"I am also."

"The one who preached to us, when we looked at him, we saw in his heart something which loved us, and when he spoke, we would have said that he was one of us."

"I shall know how; do not fear!"

Then the abbé asked:

"Give me your hand."

Gilbert reached out both of them. And the abbé pressed them in his, a long time, and he considered, dumb with emotion, that ancient, beautiful and necessary thing, the workman's hands clasped in the priest's.

They separated. Cloquet went down by the foot-path which leads to Pas-du-Loup.

It was two o'clock in the afternoon. The sky was visible toward the mountains of Morvan. But the houses of the hamlet, buried in the forest, received only the overflow of the light which passed above them. At this moment, they were already in the dusk and the shadow, and one would have said that night had begun for them. Gilbert bent his steps toward one which was more hidden than the others, and of which the window was closed. He gave three loud knocks with his cane.

Mère Justamond ran to the threshold of the neighbouring house.

"Who is knocking? What, is it you, Gilbert Cloquet! You are waiting for the key? I will bring it to you."

She disappeared, and returned almost immediately, flanked by her two daughters, Julie the tall, and Jeanne the dumpy one.

"Well, my poor man, we had given up hoping for you! See the house, how dead it looks! No one has come to inquire for you for a long time."

"No one? You are sure?"

The good woman put the key in the lock and said, struggling with her knee against the door which resisted:

"No, nobody, not a Christian. Only Méhaut the old tile-maker asked about the house. He would have liked to rent it."

"He can do so, probably," replied Gilbert.

Mère Justamond, having succeeded in pushing the door open, stood aside to let Cloquet pass. But he dared not enter at first. The musty air which blew from within, the air which dies in our homes when we are no longer there and all the memories of the past stopped him on the threshold. He wiped his forehead with his hand, as if an insect had stung him, and stooping a little, his eyes intent, he contemplated this poor cube of shadow which had been the home of his joy, the home of his sorrow, and which lived no more.

Mère Justamond only partly understood. She shook her head, protruding her lips, like a person who would like very much to know more but

who dares not ask a question. She merely asked:

"Then you did not get on in Picardy?"

Gilbert, without answering and without stirring, asked in his turn, in a very low voice, which trembled:

"Tell me, Mère Justamond, where is Marie? Do you know?"

Julie Justamond, red like a squirrel, standing by her mother, her teeth gleaming, answered:

"She was always a gad-about from her youth, and she keeps it up."

Her mother gave her a box on the ear:

"Jade! That's for you! Forgive her, Gilbert, she is still young. No, I have not had much news. People have told me that she was at Paris, with her husband."

"I will find her because she will have need of me, Mère Justamond."

He turned his head toward the woman, who pitied him when she saw him so disturbed, and he said, bending down:

"I am going to begin again to work for her."

"For her, Gilbert! It's not possible! For a daughter who has gone back on you!"

"Yes, one can come back from far away, you see. She may return, even she!"

"Who has been sold out, who has——"

"I know all that she has done, Mère Justamond, but I know what I am saying. I am going to begin again to work for her."

He went into the house and they saw him no more, except like a shadow which advances un-

certainly. Then the women went away. The hamlet relapsed into silence. There could only be heard the rustling of the dead leaves blown along the forest path.

Gilbert Cloquet remained more than an hour in his house. When he came out and passed before the house of Mère Justamond, he carried in his hand a package rolled up in a handkerchief. They were little articles, which he had not wished to take with him to the country of the Picards, among them some photographs of his wife and his daughter, a small statue, two fingers high, all smoked and formerly completely neglected, and which was the only thing he had kissed on his return. He walked slowly.

"My poor Cloquet," asked the good woman, "where are you going, so sad like that?"

"I am going to do something which costs me much to do," replied Cloquet, without stopping. "But I must go——"

She called:

"You will come back, at least?"

He made a gesture as if to say no.

XVI.

THE RETURN TO THE FARM

He saw the sunlight again, on leaving the forest, but the days had begun to shorten, for it was the month when the earth sleeps for a long time. The road which led to Fonteneilles was deserted. The men and women who had been present at the funeral had scattered across the country, and their minds, too, had returned to their own affairs. Gilbert went up alone. Yet, as he crossed the hamlet, he was seen by the women and girls who were idly dreaming and plying their needle behind the windows. Ten faces, young and old, ten pairs of eyes followed the man who walked in the middle of the road.

"Were is he going?"

He looked at no one. His head was bent and his little bundle was still in his hand.

"Where is he going? He has on his best clothes. He is not going toward the woods; no, he is going toward the upper part of the hamlet; there he is in front of Durgé's house; he is not stopping. He is already growing smaller. He is far away. Can it be? Yes, that is it! He is going up to La Vigie!"

He was going up, in fact, to La Vigie. For twenty-three years he had not once followed the

bit of road which goes from Fonteneilles to the summit of the hill on which the farm house was built, and then down on the other side. When he had to go to Crux-la-Ville, he chose to prolong the trip by going around the green hill, rather than to see again the walls which he had left and to risk meeting the master of the land on the land itself. He had left the market place behind him now, and he was on the last ascent, which is straight and regular. He glanced neither to the right nor to the left, but he raised his head, and there above, level with the sky, he watched growing larger and moving in measure with his steps, the outline of the roofs and of the broken stones whose name was La Vigie! The years which he had spent there, the best ones, those of his youth, rising above the dust and the stones which had fallen upon them, came back to life in the mind of Gilbert. He saw all the past living again, and the countenance of Monsieur Honoré Fortier, on the day when they had separated. For Gilbert this stern, smooth shaven face, round and knotted, had never changed, never grown old; it lived, transfixed in an expression of anger, disdain and defiance. Now they were going to meet again; Gilbert had changed, but had the other, the one who never left La Vigie, except to go to fairs in the red spring cart?

As the double hedge of the little road which joins the farm to the highway, and the rounded ash tree which hides still the edge of the forest, and the stables half concealing the house, "the manor" which is built on the left side of the court,

grew larger as he approached them, Gilbert Cloquet slackened his steps. "Have I indeed grown old?" he thought.

The sun shone again for a little while before it disappeared.

When the wind of the plateau blew upon his damp brow, Gilbert stopped at the entrance of the little road of the farm. He was within fifty paces of La Vigie; he saw, on one, the widest side, Monsieur Fortier's house, then the court leading down from it, and in the rear the pig-pens and the hen-house, and quite near, forming the third side of the court and showing its longest side, the ox-stalls, the cow-sheds, the barn and the stable with the pigeons on the roof. The farm seemed to be deserted.

"Perhaps he is away," murmured Gilbert.

He entered by the road, and advancing to the middle of the court, stood there, facing the door of the house, which was closed. On his left, sheltered by the wall of the cow-sheds, two young servants of La Vigie were unharnessing a mare and unyoking four oxen, and they began to point at the newcomer, and to laugh at him. He paid no more attention to them than to the gnats which were dancing around him. He did not take his glance away from the door of the farm house. He waited, leaning with one hand upon his staff of thorn, his bundle placed near him upon the ground. More than five minutes passed, and then Gilbert raised his hat. He had just seen Madame Fortier, all white, behind the window. The door opened, and Monsieur Fortier appeared on the

threshold. But he did not come forward. Gilbert's old master, the rich farmer, now the chief personage of the community, examined in his turn this day-labourer whose intentions he was trying to discover. Across the court, from one man to the other, thoughts and silent questions and answers went and came. An ill will as violent as on the first day swelled the heart and made the shaven lips of Monsieur Fortier tremble. He was on the point of crying out:

"Get out of here, Cloquet, my court is not for servants who have left me!"

But he noticed that the day-labourer had his hat in his hand, and he said, half lifting his arm.

"Come nearer, if you have any reason for coming before me."

"I have," said Gilbert.

He came, still keeping his eyes raised, so that Monsieur Fortier might be able to read the mind of his old servant. He halted at three paces from the flight of steps, and he replaced his hat.

"Monsieur Fortier, I did you a wrong when I left you twenty-three years ago."

"Do you think I have forgotten it? I am as angry with you as on the first day."

"Monsieur Fortier, I would like to repair the wrong which I did you. I would like to come back to La Vigie."

"You have taken your time about it, Gilbert Cloquet! Is it because you have no more strength that you come back to me?"

"Come, now!" said Gilbert, raising his cane slanting like an axe.

"Then, it is because you have no more money?"

"Listen," said the man, approaching a step, "you cannot reproach me for having lost my property to pay my daughter's debts. Yes, I want to earn my bread, and I am able to earn it anywhere, Monsieur Fortier! I come back to you because of the justice which I owe you, and because I shall be less alone here where I was young."

"I told you twenty-three years ago: 'Even when you are old, never will I take you back.' I have but one word!"

"I, too, Monsieur Fortier, I said: 'I want to be my own master.' Now, I think so no longer. It is not your trade which makes you free. I saw that among the Picards."

"Yes, I have heard things."

Monsieur Fortier had a little, dry laugh which Gilbert knew. When Monsieur Fortier let his chapped lips stretch, were it only a fraction, it was a sign that he would take back his first decision.

"I beg you, Monsieur Fortier! I love La Vigie!"

The farmer straightened himself up at the tone of emotion. He, too, loved La Vigie above all! At his right, he saw the two drovers, two sprigs of boys of eighteen, weak heads and bad hearts, alas! and like all the other servants that you get nowadays. And near him was Gilbert, an old man, certainly, but who loved the land, who did not drink, did not let the property of his master go to waste, who had touched and turned over every sod of the great farm.

He was moved in thinking of his interest in taking Gilbert back.

"Come," he said.

And he held out his hand toward Gilbert to make him come up to him.

Those four steps taken, the day-labourer became again the servant of Monsieur Fortier at La Vigie of Fonteneilles.

The two men drank first two glasses of the red wine of the South, one after the other, and ate a biscuit, as a sign of rejoicing. Gilbert had regained his courage, and asked questions about the changes and the plans.

"You will find your lair again; it is not so soft as a bed!"

"It is all the same to me. The oxen have the same names?"

"Always! Griveau, Chaveau, Corbin, Montagne, Jaunet and Rossigneau."

"So much the better," said Gilbert, laughing contentedly. "I shall have nothing to learn over again, then."

"Not much, God be praised," replied Monsieur Fortier.

He raised the curtain of the window toward the fields:

"Well, then," he said, "while there is still light, go make a round of the fields, my old Gilbert."

Gilbert crossed the court, and went into the meadow which lies behind the ox-stalls, and from where you can see Fonteneilles with its forest. But he remembered especially the view from the pasture. He reached by the road the great pasture

field which lies upon the plateau to the right, and he saw again the mountains of the Morvan and all the horizon which he had looked at in his youth. Then along the paths, and by the leafless hedges, he wandered through the fields, one by one.

The animals looked at him for a moment, and began to graze again, thinking: "It is all right, he belongs here"; some thrushes, of the large kind, perched upon the poplar trees, which had now only a leaf or two, called out before going to crouch down in a tuft of mistletoe; some ravens saluted him with their wings passing in flight; some wood-pigeons launched in swift course from the golden heights, plunged, circling round and round, toward the valleys already blue.

It was cold. The setting sun foretold wind on the next day. The bell of Fonteneilles sounded half-way up the slope. Gilbert was alone, above the vast country, in the falling darkness. He thought of the house where he would return no more, hidden away down there, among the tall forest trees of Pas-du-Loup. He thought of his comrades, the day-labourers of Fonteneilles, and he understood that he loved them all, that he forgave everything, and that it would be good for him to live again among them.

Then as the light began to fail, he embraced with his glance the whole round hill where he was going to begin his work again on the morrow. The grass was beautiful. The fallow lands were waiting for the plough. In many a place, above the broken lands, the grain lifted up its green point. Gilbert uncovered his head and he said:

"It matters little, now, to live with others. Heat, cold, fatigue or death matter little now. My heart is at peace."

He felt a great living joy spring up of itself in his regenerated heart.

And again he said:

"I am old, and yet I am happy now for the first time."

THE END

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