THE SACRIFICE OF SILENCE

· BY · EDOUARD · ROD ·

THE

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EDOUARD ROD

TRANSLATED BY

JOHN W. HARDING

"Are there not cases when thanks to the aberrations of the social organization and to social prejudices, lying, deceit and hypocrisy almost become virtues? Are there not cases when recourse to base actions is so painful that to perpetrate them may be the most heroic of sacrifices?"—Page 17.

NEW YORK

G. W. Dillingham Co., Publishers

MDCCCXCIX

The Sacrifice of Silence.

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PREFACE.

EMERSON somewhere, and truly, observes that there is a strange power in silence. But there are many kinds of silence. This has been tritely attested from time immemorial by axioms and epigrams laudatory of timely mutism as being at once one of the virtues of the wise, the ornament and safeguard of the ignorant, and an efficacious element of repute, whether deserved or not. Then there is that silence, "the child of love, which expresses everything and proclaims more loudly than tongue is able to do;" which is "the ecstatic bliss of souls that by intelligence converse."

The particular phases of silence of which M. Rod treats have nothing in common with these, save incidentally with that which is the so eloquent offspring of love. He shows, with consummate art and in two widely contrasting examples, that silence under certain conditions constitutes an heroic sacrifice, so generous in its abnegation, and in one case, in which the unblemished reputation of a wife and mother is

involved, so unflinchingly steadfast, as to impart a character of nobleness and grandeur to the sin of prohibited love and its inevitable accompaniments, lying, deceit and hypocrisy.

Whether André Kermoysan and Mme. Hfrdevin succumbed to the passion they mutually inspired, which at immensurable sacrifice they masked from the world, and whose secret they carried with them into that dread and most mysterious of all silences, the silence of the tomb, is a moot question that is left for the reader to decide for himself.

The case of Mme. H—— and M. de Sourbelles is an entirely different one. They capitulated to their mad love without resistance, in open defiance of the conventions. Spurned by the world whose moral laws they outraged, bound together by their common fault, by a bond "stronger than any invented by man," they isolated themselves, caring for nothing, desiring nothing but each other's society, to be all in all to each other. But in due course the tie which might not be severed became a shackle, wearisome, irksome, insupportable; their paradise was transformed into a hell of dead love, dead sentiment, and remorse. It was in these circumstances that the sacrifice of silence was made and stoically borne by each. Their life was a terrible lie. They endeavored with the cunning of despair to conceal from each other their inward martyrdom, and played the comedy of an endur-

ing affection until death tragically rang down the curtain.

The "Sacrifice of Silence" is a psychological study of great power and is unique in that the heart of man is the subject. The heart of woman has been laid bare, dissected, analysed by psychologists of all times—and it remains as much an enigma as ever. But in this fascinating pursuit the enigmatical heart of man has been largely overlooked. M. Rod has taken it in hand, subjected it to a microscopical examination, and sets forth in masterful manner what his researches have revealed.

The success of his efforts was instantaneous and striking in France, where the book has gone through many editions. During his recent sojourn in this country, which he visited for the purpose of lecturing in the principal universities and colleges, M. Rod frequently intimated to me in discussing his literary work that he considered this novel to be the best he had written. I have endeavored to preserve the author's style as closely as the exigencies of translation would permit. For the adaptation of M. Rod's verse I am indebted to Mr. Stanhope Sams.

It may not be out of place in this preface to retrace briefly M. Rod's literary career. He is forty years of age, and was born at Nyon, in the canton of Vaud, Switzerland. He studied at the Universities of Berne and Berlin, giving especial attention to philology. He then went to Paris and

devoted himself to literary criticism. By his contributions to the leading newspapers and reviews he soon established a reputation as a writer of considerable erudition, gifted with a peculiarly graceful style. He was a warm admirer of EMILE ZOLA, and in 1880 published a pamphlet entitled "Á propos de l'assommoir," in which he defended that high priest of realism with skill and conviction, and was violently attacked for his pains.

This pamphlet was followed by other critical essays that were published in volume form, notable among them being "Wagner et l'esthétique allemande." M. ROD is a enthusiastic subscriber to the great German composer's musical theories. Other well-known works of criticism by M. ROD include "Le développement du mythe d'Eschyle dans la littérature," "Giacomo Leopardi," "Dante," "Goethe," and "Stendhal."

But it is as a novelist that he is best known to the general public of both hemispheres. His novels are mainly of a psychological character and many of them are markedly pessimistic in tone. M. ROD has been an assiduous student of SCHOPENHAUER. His first volume of fiction was published in 1881. It was entitled "Palmyre Veulard." Then in succession came "La Chute de Miss Topsy," "L'Autopsie du Docteur Z," "La Femme d'Henri Vanneau," "La Course à la mort," "Tatiana Leïloff," "Le Sens de la vie," "Les Trois Cœurs," "La Sacrifiée," "La Vie

privée de Michel Tessier" (which has been dramatised), "La Seconde Vie de Michel Tessier," "Les Roches Blanches," "Dernier Refuge," "Le ménage du Pasteur Naudié," "La Haut," and "Le Silence," which is herewith presented under the title of "The Sacrifice of Silence."

In 1884 M. Rod with a few other ambitious young littérateurs founded the *Revue Contemporaine*. In 1887 he was appointed professor of comparative literature at the University of Geneva, but soon returned to Paris to resume his career as critic and novelist with the result that he has won to the front rank of contemporaneous writers.

JOHN W. HARDING.

THE

SACRIFICE OF SILENCE.

PART I.

A CONVERSATION.

CHAPTER I.

It was after one of those dinners which periodically reunite men of various professions, old school or college chums separated by the exigencies of life, yet among whom the tie of boyhood memories subsists and who meet again with pleasure. Coffee and cigars were being enjoyed. The conversation, after having touched upon several subjects, had turned to the discussion of a rather curious newspaper item. A man well known in society circles, whose name, I think, was M. de Préfontaine, had been taken home with a knife stab in the abdomen. After lingering for three days he had expired without having uttered a single word that could throw any light upon the tragedy, although he was fully con-

scious to the last and a clever examining magistrate had tried every possible means to induce him to explain how he came by his fatal wound.

At first each member of the company judged this determined obstinacy according to his own temperament. In some it excited admiration; others expressed the view that it was a little too heroic.

"Well, had I been in his place I should have told everything," said a celebrated novelist.

"What for?" asked somebody. "The confession would not have saved him."

"No, but it would have relieved him," concluded the novelist, accentuating his Southern accent.

Thereupon conjectures as to the nature of the secret thus preserved by the victim's tragic silence were indulged in. Then everybody being agreed that it was an affair of conjugal vengeance we fell to discussing the right to exercise vengeance. We soon wearied of this commonplace theme, however, and then the conversation became affined, was monopolised by the more subtle among us, who began a discussion upon the essence, as it were, of irregular liaisons.

A first point was established without giving rise to serious contestation: that marriage is a defective institution, altogether inadequate to regulate the relations between the sexes. Its suppression was proposed; but in seeking the means to accomplish this reform it was found that marriage being

the corner stone of the social edifice, it could not be destroyed without overturning the whole organisation of the world: the family, property, etc.; and even the boldest admitted that such a revolution presented practical difficulties calculated to put an end to the good will of the legislative powers for a very long time. The conversation came near being dropped at this discovery which brought home to us the inutility of our observations. As sometimes happens, however, among persons who, although having nothing to say, are absolutely bent upon talking, it revived, and one of us perpetrated the following paradox:

"Marriage cannot be accepted and respected by the dry hearted, the indifferent, the lukewarm, who live without the need of love, and who consequently know nought of devotion, forgetfulness of self, exaltation, in short, all those extreme sentiments by which the soul can be ennobled. There is a normal state only for the egotists and the soulless: it is they who, being the great majority, have succeeded in making their dull conception of life and their cold canalisation of love prevail, and in imposing it even upon the best among us, who have been so weak as to conform thereto. So that to-day one considers one fulfills one's duty by renouncing love, which is the ideal, in favor of marriage, which is the negation of the ideal."

These remarks, emphasized by a tone of semi-

banter, met with some approval; but a grave voice replied:

"No, the noblest are not those who avoid this legal yoke of marriage in order to give a free rein to their instincts. They are those who having recognized its inadequacy nevertheless accept it, not through weakness nor through dryness of soul, but through a spirit of justice and sacrifice. You speak of devotion: is there more devotion in following the impulses of one's heart than in resisting them to the profit of the word given and of a being to whom one has bound one's self? No doubt the best are rarely exempt from the temptations of illegitimate desires, which are always excused, or which it is sought to excuse, by a thousand specious arguments; but they resist them, they overcome them, and their soul, so far from losing thereby, gains at once in strength and tenderness. And really, if it existed but to teach self-denial to a few select individuals, marriage would have its grandeur and reason for being."

This stoical declaration was approved, like the preceding one which it contradicted. For such are intelligent men: through understanding everything they get so that they cease to make distinctions; indifference renders them versatile in suchwise that they readily change their opinion upon questions which they take up only with their mind and which can be solved only by character.

One of us, entering into the views of the first speaker and following up his argument, added:

"In any case, there is in irregular liaisons an inevitable defect which makes them particularly odious: they are condemned to lying, deceit, and hypocrisy. That alone, it seems to me, would render them prohibitory to hearts of any delicacy, to persons of exalted mind."

"Do you think so?" responded some one with great vivacity. "Are there not then cases when, thanks to the aberrations of the social organization and to social prejudices, lying, deceit and hypocrisy almost become virtues? Are there not cases when recourse to base actions is so painful that to perpetrate them may be the most heroic of sacrifices?" . . . .

Protests interrupted the speaker, for the austere words he had uttered inclined us to be virtuous. But our companion continued with growing animation (perhaps, I thought, because he was defending a personal cause):

"No, no, dissimulation and lying are not always debasing; it does happen, on the contrary, that they exalt and ennoble like everything that impels us to a great expenditure of internal energy. To love and suffer in silence—do you not understand what that may sometimes mean? I have not, of course, in mind those vulgar liaisons which have no other object than a mediocre sensuousness, like those that are currently formed between insignificant and corrupt individuals;

but a true love which fills the entire being, which engrosses, absorbs, exalts it, which makes it better, which occupies of itself the whole heart, the whole intelligence, one of those amours infinitely rare, infinitely precious, which are life's most beautiful flower,—and which never, never can be avowed! Try to measure the strength necessary to prevent it from betraying itself by a word, by a gesture, by a look! Calculate the heroism which sacrifices its free and proud expression to the laws, conventions and usages of a world to which it is a thousand times superior. When this love goes through one of those crises in which the heart is breaking, in which cries rise to the lips and choking sobs to the throat, yet all of which must be suppressed—think what in such a moment the mask of indifference costs, think of the tortures it hides. Tell me if then the hypocrisy of silence, the lie of the quiet, calm voice, the dissimulation of living the life that others live do not constitute a sacrifice, too, the most painful that one can exact of a man and, consequently, the most noble ?"

Developed as it was with somewhat feverish conviction this thesis found some supporters and the discussion between the adversaries and partisans of established institutions waxed animated. But I ceased to take part in it, and even to listen to it. The captious affirmation of the last interlocutor, debatable most certainly, paradoxical and dangerous as it was, had awakened within

me a memory that time had almost effaced: that of a secret surprised one day, or at least perceived, through a series of details so tenuous that hitherto it had seemed to me impossible to assemble and formulate them. And now my mania of a literary man, excited by the conversation I have just recounted, began to work upon these details of which the almost unseizable ensemble appeared suddenly to me as a sort of illustration of the theory that was being discussed around me. Instinctively I sought to determine them, to group them, to impart to them the form of a narrative. It was a very difficult task. In effect, I knew almost nothing about the history on which my thoughts were dwelling. I could not admit that it had existed only in my imagination; but in any case I had seen but a few moments of it, those which by their intensity had forced the principals of the adventure to exert all their strength of will to remain impassible. Definitions and transitions were entirely lacking. What, then, was I to do in order to grasp the facts and then set them forth in an intelligible manner?

On reflection, I concluded that the easiest and best thing to do was to present personages and things as I had seen them, and without essaying to fill by artificial means the gaps left by direct observation, offer only my hypotheses as circumstances evoked them and exactly as they should be formed in my mind. It is thus that I wrote

the following pages. If I manage to get my impressions shared and to inspire the emotion which in spite of their intermittent uncertainty, obscurity and incoherence the events related occasioned me at the time of their occurrence I shall perchance be excused for departing from the usual methods of the story teller. Has this intuition been true or false in its deductions? I do not know; but even from the distance at which I review the facts they appear to me as significant as they did at the time they impressed me.

PART II.

A HISTORY—KERMOYSAN.

CHAPTER I.

In the first place it behooves me to evoke two of the rarest figures it has been my good fortune to encounter.

One of the first drawing rooms that I frequented when I entered society was that of Mme. B———. It was a most interesting centre where in a *milieu* of quiet and rather old fashioned elegance the intimate friends of the hostess gathered one night each week, forming a compact nucleus around which passed a large number of people of all sorts, mostly celebrated At the time I made her acquaintance Mme. B——— was nearly seventy years of age. She was one of those who make the most of life. She knew how to grow old: her last trait of coquettishness was to admit her age. She bore it as proudly as she bore her white hair, and was imbued with the sentiments of her years—kindness, indulgence and a delicate comprehension, with the result that the youngest of her intimates treated her with that affectionate deference which superior

old people alone inspire in those who surround them. Mme. B——— took a fancy to me, doubtless owing to my extreme naïveté, and without appearing to do so, so that, at the time I had not even a suspicion of the service she was rendering me, she sought to teach me to note and guide my sympathies.

For several weeks, which later she smiling referred to as my period of probation, she received me only in the afternoon, at tea time, and thus I passed many hours listening to the tittle-tattle of the amiable women who called upon her, and learning to dissemble any astonishment. I might feel and to overcome my too obvious ingenuousness. When she judged that I had made such progress that I should not cut a too ridiculous figure in her drawing room she finally invited me to her Tuesday soirées. It was with no little emotion that I made my real début in society, for my timidity was extreme, and for that matter it was justified. I felt awkward indeed in this little circle where reigned at one and the same time the ease of intimacy and the distinction of witty repartee. The very evening that I entered it for the first time Mme. B——— came to me in a window recess where I had taken refuge and pointing out two persons who were conversing in a corner of the room, apart from the other groups, said:

"Those are the most perfect beings I know."

As can be imagined, this admiring verdict of

a judge who was so hard to please excited my curiosity in the highest degree. First of all I gazed from a distance at these persons whose superiority, which I accepted without question, even as a dogma, filled me with awe. Then, managing to overcome my timidity I sought to get a nearer view of them. I succeeded; but in my eyes they continued to preserve the sort of aureola with which Mme. B———'s tribute had nimbussed them, and it was doubtless because they were together when I first saw them that I came to unite them more closely in my thoughts.

Although many years have elapsed since he disappeared, the man, André Kermoysan, has by no means been forgotten. The novels of this naval officer, who, before Loti, made exotism fashionable, are still read, and his fine intense drama *Lautrec*, as is well known, still holds its place in the repertory of the Comedie-Francaise. At the time when Mme. B——— first called my attention to him he was at the height of his popularity and success. His name was in everybody's mouth and his books were in everybody's hands. As to the author himself, the interest he excited was the keener from the fact that he was rarely seen in society.

He was about thirty-eight years old. His close cut hair and slight moustache were prematurely gray and contrasted with the persistent youthfulness of his calm, handsome face, which was of semi-transparent whiteness with

regular features. His bright, soft, light brown eyes imparted to his physiognomy an expression of almost feminine tenderness. In his manners, his movements of slightly indolent gracefulness, his few and harmonious gestures, in his remarks also, and even in his deep voice were extreme reserve, but so discreet that one could not have told whether it was natural, or clever affectation. Of perfect politeness although he made no advances, and of an amiability in which was a good deal of forced benevolence, he never gave himself away. One could treat with him upon subjects of the most diverse character, and yet after a long conversation to which he would lend himself with the best grace in the world, one left him without having gained anything of his confidence or friendship. The sympathy which at first sight he almost invariably inspired went out to him only to return, not deceived, but rejected. One felt that one was kept at a distance, in spite of the kindness of his reception, by an invisible, indefinable obstacle that separated one from him.

I was introduced to M. Kermoysan. He examined me for an instant with his bright eyes, spoke to me, listened to me, and even appeared to take an interest in my débuts, with as much interest as he could take in anything. When he perceived that I persistently sought his society he invited me to call upon him. Although I could see that this invitation, which was any-

thing but a pressing one, cost him an effort, I could not resist the pleasure of profiting by it. He received me with his customary politeness, which appeared to me to become more cordial, so that I thought I might, without too much indiscretion, repeat my visit several times, at intervals that became gradually shorter.

He lived in the Rue Oudinot in a little entresol that was filled with treasures he had brought back from his voyages—a collection of arms from the East, painted marble idols from India, and especially stuffs, sumptuous stuffs which reflected the light and presented to the eye a chatoyante harmony of colors. The windows opened upon a tranquil landscape of gardens in which old-fashioned flowers nodded in the breeze and age-worn trees o'ershadowed them. An old servant named Adolphe, ex-valet of an Ambassador of the Second Empire, did all the household work, including the cooking. Between master and man there was a perfect understanding. Adolphe knew his master's wants and few instructions were necessary.

M. Kermoysan was always at home. Once and once only I found him at work. I was about to withdraw, but he requested me to remain. He threw aside his pen and seemed delighted at having a pretext to interrupt his labor.

"I am very lazy these times," he said. "Stay, I beg, and let us talk; it is easier."

It seemed to me that Adolphe, solemn-looking

in spite of the white apron he wore all the morning, shook his gray head sadly.

That day M. Kermoysan was more cordial, more expansive than usual. He talked to me about a love story upon which he was working—"when I can work," he added. He related the plot and sketched the characters of it with some animation. I ventured a few observations, to which he responded. Then little by little his attention relaxed, and his entrain disappeared. It was thus that all our talks ended. He listened to me, and answered me, but he was always thinking of something else. Sometimes I imagined I could read on his brow and in his eyes that obstinate, ever-present, ever-uppermost, thought, like a phrase written in unknown letters, in a foreign tongue. I was wounded in the enthusiastic friendship I entertained for him although I had never dared to manifest it, and I told myself that this mysterious thought, which I could not decipher, would be an obstacle between us even were he, in consideration of my sympathy, to forget the difference between our ages and positions.

The person who was conversing with M. Kermoysan the day I saw him for the first time at Mme. B———'s was a woman still young, although not in the first bloom of youthfulness, whose name was Mme. Herdevin. She was tall, of almost exaggerated slenderness, very elegant and handsome. Her beauty however was of

the kind that does not strike one at first sight; that has to be discovered and is difficult to describe. Besides, time has effaced its traits from my memory. They still linger in my mind, no doubt, but vaguely, indistinctly, in a *flou* of lines and colors like that of the faces of saints on the frescoes of old convents. The sheen of her golden hair, which she wore in the Grecian style, alone appears with anything approaching clearness; the rest escapes me, like so many other visages death has veiled.

I remember that when Mme. B——— pointed Kermoysan and Mme. Herdevin out to me as they stood in a corner of the salon, I observed them at first from a distance; then I gradually drew nearer to them, after the manner of a timid and inquisitive child. Mme. Herdevin was listening: her physiognomy expressed a sustained, exclusive attention, which seemed to isolate her, so to speak. Then, in turn, she spoke. I could not hear her words, but I could hear her voice, and incontinently felt the charm of it. It was music. Such a voice expresses its meaning far better than words. The impression it made upon me was such that even now, after all these years, I seem to hear it: it falls upon my ear from a great distance, faintly, in dying accents, and it is but the sweeter. I was charmed by it to the point of rapture, and when in a few moments she left Kermoysan and mingled with the indifferent groups scattered about the salon

I summoned up courage enough to beg Mme. B——— to introduce me to her. Indulgent with my enthusiasm she did so with pleasure.

I obtained without difficulty from Mme. Herdevin the commonplace phrases to which every good young man who makes his entrée into society has a right. But this did not satisfy me; I longed to see her nearer, at her home. Now, I was altogether an ordinary personage, awkward, insignificant, lacking in conversational powers and any agreeable talent, scarcely able to dance properly, in fact that nothing, absolutely nothing, could recommend to the attention of a stranger. Mme. Herdevin could scarcely have noticed me the day I was presented to her, did not know me when I met her again, and for several weeks regarded me as an importunate individual who annoyed her with his attentions. All that time she produced upon me an impression corresponding exactly with that caused by Kermoysan, whom I was beginning to visit. Her's was the same reserve, and of the same nature. No matter where she might be, her soul was elsewhere, and that in spite of the visible efforts she made to interest herself in what was passing around her. She lent herself to conversation with the best grace, and yet one felt that her real desire was to make it as brief as possible, and when she ceased to talk she appeared more at ease, as though silence were her real element.

This attitude, far from diminishing my sym-

pathy, increased it. Little by little, thanks to my tenacity, I succeeded in getting nearer to her; I obtained a few smiles, a few words above the commonplace, a few kind looks; it was as though she were accustoming herself to seeing me in her circle of familiars. I rejoiced at this progress, slight as it was. I reached the height of my desires the day when she invited me to her Thursday five o'clock tea, adding as she did so:

"You will not find much amusement. I rarely receive any but a few intimate friends, and my house is not very gay."

To visit her in her home, breathe the same air, I asked nothing more: in early youth one is imbued with new, pure yet ardent sentiments, that it would be difficult to define. I did not love Mme. Herdevin, but I was on the point of loving her, or rather, I think, of adoring her, with the ecstasy of a pilgrim.

Before calling upon her I judged it prudent to ask Mme. B——— for a little information about the Herdevins that would enable me to avoid making clumsy mistakes. My old friend willingly told me what it was necessary for me to know:

The husband, M. Léopold Herdevin, was a stock broker, extremely wealthy, but brutal, coarse, of bad habits, who seemed to belong to a different species to his wife's. In reality, if not ostensibly, they had long lived apart: he in a world of actresses and horses, she amid a very

few and faithful friends, who sought her society and manifested deep affection for her.

"You will not often meet M. Herdevin in his wife's drawing-room," said Mme. B———. "When by chance he does appear there, with his heavy yellow face he produces the effect of a smear of oil.

They had two twin girls, six years of age. One of them, named Martha, was afflicted with a spinal malady which had checked her development. Preserved like a fragile object the poor wee, puny, suffering thing lived suspended to the breath of her mother whom she adored with the little tendernesses of a precocious child in the shadow of death. The girl's affliction was without doubt a thorn in Mme. Herdevin's flesh, her constant thought, the wound which even more than the indifference and coarseness of her husband prevented her from profiting by her beauty, her charm, and her remaining years of youthfulness.

Mme. B——— obligingly recounted to me all these details, then, perceiving that I was deeply interested, added with the kind smile of an indulgent grandmother:

"You are I fancy in the way of falling in love with Mme. Herdevin. I must warn you that she has suffered too much from the realities of life to be romantic. She has a solid heart and a cool head, you may be sure. She is nearing her thirtieth year and is unhappy in her home life,

and yet no word of gossip about her has ever been uttered. But you will do right in frequenting her society as much as you can. When you have broken the ice, if you do succeed in breaking it, you will know what the charm of a perfect woman can be."

I had blushed to the ears, as though I had been caught in the act of doing something wrong, and to hide my embarrassment I brought up the subject of M. Herdevin again.

"Even if you see very little of him, you will soon be edified, never fear," said Mme. B———. "He is one of those persons one knows quickly, and whom one experiences no desire to become better acquainted with. His wife has put up with a great deal, and, I think, has suffered much. Now she is resigned: she does not even feel the pain he still would like to cause her."

"Has she ever loved him?" I asked rather stupidly.

Mme. B——— looked at me a little mockingly:

"I don't know," she said. "How do you suppose I should know such a thing as that? But, in women, even the best of them, there is besides love, amour-propre. Its wounds also hurt, and these have not been spared your friend, I can assure you."

In a short while I was one of the regular frequenters of Mme. Herdevin's salon—a large salon, of wholly external sumptuousness, destined for others, a salon to which the mistress

of the house was indifferent, which participated in nothing of her grace. Notwithstanding the enormous logs that blazed in the fire-place the room was always rather chilly. Moreover one rarely found more than five or six persons assembled there, and they spoke in subdued tones, as though they were in a church. Conversation was carried on slowly and lacked interest. Many would have been bored to death, and truth to tell, I certainly should have been bored myself had not the presence of Mme. Herdevin, however cold and absent minded she might be, compensated for the most insipid remarks.

I had expected often to meet M. Kermoysan there, since he sought her company in society. I soon remarked however that he rarely came, that his visit was always brief, and that his presence did not add either to the entrain or sociability of the company. Once we were invited together to dinner. His attitude was that of a casual guest rather than of a friend. He spoke but little, and was more reserved, more distracted, more *insaisissable* than ever. Moreover the repast was a gloomy one. Notwithstanding the excellence of the dishes and of the wines, the conversation lagged painfully and was kept at a very low level by the puns of the master of the house. Sometimes his observations, which he emphasised with a loud guffaw, were so trivial as to cause his wife obvious discomfort, like a sting the smart of which was betrayed by a

slight knitting of her brow. I understood then why she did not receive more often than she was obliged to. But why ask Kermoysan and me to meet people whom we had no pleasure in knowing, who could have no interest in us, and whom in all probability we should never see again?

Weeks passed in this way, and I did not know Mme. Herdevin better than on the night when I first heard the sound of her voice and she vouchsafed me a couple of insignificant phrases. The ice was long in breaking. Yet little by little, by dint of talks which became more familiar, and especially after having on several occasions found myself *en tête-à-tête* with her, I was able, or thought I was able, with some chance of divining rightly, to catch a trait of her character:

She was kind, with the natural kindness of a sister of charity, but with that passive kindness which manifests itself by sentiments more than by acts. I became satisfied also that she was intelligent, or rather, comprehensive. Not, however, after the manner of women of culture who reason about everything as specialists; no, but she possessed that intelligence of the heart which understands everything, which is exercised in preference upon the small things of life, which shines in all that one says about others and in the discreet semi-confidences one makes about one's self. She was sad also and especially, with a touching sadness which she endeavored

with infinite art to conceal, yet which revealed itself, enveloping her in a sort of mystery that added to her charm.

This mystery attracted me to her more and more, and at last I came to enclose her within the wide limits of a double and absolutely contradictory hypothesis: "Either she has never loved and suffers from the need of loving, or else she loves too much."

As can be seen my youthful perspicacity was giving itself space.

CHAPTER II.

I must now relate a series of facts unconnected by any apparent link, some of which did not strike me at the time of their occurrence and which only conveyed a meaning to me later.

Mme. B——— sometimes favored me by detaining me after her other visitors had taken their departure. On these occasions I greatly enjoyed the friendly and familiar chat which succeeded the somewhat high-toned conversation that had been indulged in. We talked more especially about others. Mme. B——— always experienced great pleasure in exercising, though without the slightest malice, her faculties of analysis upon persons of her acquaintance. The astonishment which her deductions sometimes caused me amused her hugely. One afternoon when I found myself alone with her the conversation turned upon Kermoysan, who had made a long call upon her at the same time as Mme. Herdevin.

"Have you read any of his verses?" asked Mme. B——— suddenly.

"Verses!" I exclaimed. "He has never published any that I know of."

"That is true; but he has written some. They

are very scarce, and are only known to his closest friends. Would you like to see them?"

Without waiting for my reply she went to a little Louis Quinze writing desk, took a small volume bound in vellum from a drawer and handed it to me. It was a collection of about fifty pages on fine paper, without title or the name of the author. Only six copies had been printed.

"Read," she said.

I read aloud one after the other the poems which made up the collection, and which generally were short.

The poets of the young school would have accounted the verses bad. They were of a truth a trifle "out of date," and rendered heavy by monotonous cæsura, a few awkward expletives, and very ordinary rhyme, as is often the case with the verses of even clever writers who are not expert in the use of the language of poetry. Notwithstanding these shortcomings, however, they interested me deeply; for they expressed, occasionally with really touching intensity, the half-veiled nuances of a sentiment at once tender and sad, culpable and tormented. In these few pages were cries of pain, cries of anguish, cries of joy, cries of remorse. One could divine therein a soul troubled to its profoundest depths, tossed hither and thither by the blasts of an irresistible hurricane, like the poor souls drawn into the eternal maelstrom, to which in fact the poet himself alluded in one of his most ardent pieces, and

gradually one experienced that sort of vertigo which the spectacle of *grandes passions* sometimes occasions. A few of the verses, which I only read once, impressed themselves upon my memory. On returning home I dotted them down in a diary in which I was accustomed daily to record my observations, and from which I now cull them:

Time builds the infinite from the vanished years,
As waves are garnered on the ocean's floor.
Men yet unborn shall feel love's joys and fears,
But our soul's flower, though watered with our tears,
Shall bear love's radiant fruit for us no more.

* * * * *

Still though my heart shall wither in the blast—
You, who illumed the darkness where I strayed
And left bright paths of gold athwart the shade—
I bless you—you who loved me in that past.

* * * * *

O women! 'tis through Kindness that you fall,
Cold Virtue passes, blind to our distress,
Chaste, without pity, without tenderness.

* * * * *

The fatal wind that buffets, stifles me,
Has borne thee deathward, thou so pure, so sweet!

* * * * *

What fearest thou? Let the world unmask our love
And spurn us! We can flee!

* * * * *

E'en though earth's span should part me from thee, love,
I should my haven reach and die within thine arms.

These verses, the only ones I preserved, were perhaps not the best nor the most chracteristic of the little collection, a few pages of which caused my voice to tremble. Mme. B——— listened with half-closed eyes, as though this elevated and romantic poetry, in which here and there the influence of Lamartine was perceptible, caused her the greatest pleasure, notwithstanding that she had read it many a time and oft.

"Well?" she queried, when I closed the book and handed it back to her, "what do you think of these verses?"

I reflected a moment.

"They moved me greatly," I answered.

"Are they not fine—even though they do not resemble those of your literary friends ?"

"Fine, I do not know about that; but they are true . . . . ."

Mme. B——— glanced at me interrogatively and I explained:

"Yes, true—too true, even. Do you know madame, I cannot undertand how M. Kermoysan could have published them ? It is not in his nature to do such a thing. He is a closed book, he never reveals anything of himself, and these verses are a veritable confession, most sincere and spontaneous in their accent."

Mme. B——— shook her head.

"Perhaps," said she, "you are drawing upon your imagination. When M. Kermoysan presented the volume to me he told me that he had

written the verses for a novel, and that not being able to finish this novel he had been unwilling to lose them and therefore had them printed. Does this appear to you unlikely ?' '

"A little so. I am rather inclined to think . . . . what shall I say ? . . . . that he wrote them because he was impelled to, that they sprang from his very self at those times when one feels the need of crying aloud one's secrets because they choke one and will not be suppressed."

"But in that case he need only have written them. Why should he have published them ?"

"He is all the same a man of letters . . . Or else—who knows ?—he may have published them in order to offer them to the person who inspired them."

Mme. B——— smiled.

"How subtle you are!" she said with a tinge of irony.

After a moment of silence she added:

"After all it is not impossible. Kermoysan is very mysterious . . . . maybe he has a very complicated liaison."

My curiosity was aroused, and the opportunity to learn something more about this man who interested me so much being a favorable one I asked:

"Have people gossiped about him? Is it known whether he has a past?"

"A past!" exclaimed Mme. B———. "Several pasts! Very many pasts! In France, in Paris, without counting others which he left in those

queer countries he pretends to love. M. Kermoysan has gone the pace. There is a little of everything in his life: not only women, but cards, even wine, opium, and I know not what. A real sailor, in a word. As soon as he was on terra firma he lost control over himself."

"I was not aware of all this."

"Well, you see, there are a good many things you are not aware of. Besides, if he used to be talked about a good deal, it is not the case now. He settled down five or six years ago, and now, they say, he is as good as a plaster saint."

"That is very strange!"

"Do you think so? Well—no, there is nothing strange in it. Age is a factor to be considered. Whatever we may do to resist it, we grow older all the same, and there comes a time when we must call a halt, become sedate, and make arrangements to pass the remainder of our days in peace and comfort, 'make an end of it,' as you men say."

"Undoubtedly. But what arrangements has he made?"

This simple question embarrassed Mme. B——.

"Well," she said, "as I observed, he has settled down. What more can I say? Is not that making a sufficiently final end of it?"

I did not answer, and Mme. B——— continued:

"In fact he has settled down too much for a man of his age. And he was misguided enough at one time to get his virtue talked about too

much. Three years ago when his *Lautrec* was produced, the actress who played the principal rôle fell in love with him. It was one of those transient passions to which women of the stage are subject. I cannot remember the details, but there was a perfect comedy about this drama—a comedy in which he took the part of a Joseph. It caused a good deal of amusement in society circles at the time. To-day it is forgotten."

"That," said I, "is a very significant incident indeed. How can it be believed that it was through virtue that a man such as he, an ex-viveur, played the always rather ridiculous rôle of him who will not allow himself to be loved? He has not been converted, that I know of?"

"No, he believes in nothing: he is a perfect infidel."

"Consequently if it was not piety that rendered him so good it must have been something else."

"Perhaps he was just simply tired," suggested Mme. B———.

She was joking. At that very moment Mme. Herdevin's face appeared clearly in my mind: it was an intuition that could be explained by nothing save the fact that I was accustomed to associate her in my thoughts with Kermoysan.

"It may be, too," I said, "that a great love——"

Mme. B——— appeared to weigh this supposition, then she rejected it.

"In the first place," she declared, "you are incapable of a great love, you men of to-day."

"Exceptionally ——" I insinuated.

But she concluded:

"Besides it would be known. Such a thing could not remain a secret. No, no, you have not guessed aright. No, monsieur the psychologist, you will have to seek for something else."

"I will seek for it," I replied.

But I was sure that I had found it.

CHAPTER III.

A few days after the foregoing conversation I met Kermoysan at Mme. Herdevin's. They were alone, she seated in the corner of a small lounge near the fire, he ensconced in an arm-chair at some distance from the lounge. They received me with friendliness, still I had the impression that my visit was inopportune, and proposed to make it as short as possible. I had hardly seated myself, however, when a servant entered with a scared air and said something in a low voice to Mme. Herdevin. She rose at once, and begging us to excuse her for a moment left the drawing room by a door which opened into her husband's study. I continued to converse with Kermoysan. He was absent-minded, and two or three times, in spite of himself, his eyes wandered towards the door. The conversation dropped after a few remarks. We found nothing to talk about, and sat facing each other with some embarrassment, both a prey to the same curiosity which we could not and would not avow. Soon that curiosity increased to the point of uneasiness. The voice of M. Herdevin, which we had not at first heard, rose louder and louder in the adjoining room. I could not prevent myself from muttering:

"What is the matter with him?"

Kermoysan shrugged his shoulders.

"A family quarrel," he said.

And he added with a great effort to appear ironical and indifferent:

"The man is so vulgar! We really ought to be grateful to him for not scolding his wife in our presence."

At this moment the brutal voice, raised to a high pitch, reached us distinctly through the partition and hangings. We heard two or three oaths which ended in a violent: "Tonnerre de Dieu!" We rose together with the same movement of indignation.

"The wretch!" I cried.

Kermoysan, as though impelled by a spring, made two or three steps in the direction of the door. He stopped, returned to his armchair, sank into it and muttered as he bit his lips:

"He is capable of beating her!"

In the next room the voice had become covered and we could hear only the irritated murmuring. I had remained standing.

"This is odious!" I exclaimed.

My companion was very pale, but he had recovered his calmness.

"He is the husband," he said, gritting his teeth. "It is none of our business," and he kept his eyes fixed upon the tip of his shoe which he was moving restlessly on the carpet.

We remained quiet, hearing nothing more.

suddenly the violent slamming of a door apprised us that the storm was over. I heaved, I admit, a sigh of relief. As to Kermoysan he passed his hand over his eyes with the gesture of a man who dispels a nightmare.

Mme. Herdevin, however, soon returned, but hesitatingly, and with a pained air. She excused herself for having kept us waiting so long.

"My husband had something urgent to communicate to me," she said gently.

Her limpid eyes seemed to ask us whether we had heard what had passed—and implored us not to take any notice of it.

I was extremely embarrassed, fearing that it would be indiscreet of me to prolong my visit, and that it might worry her if I left too soon. I therefore gave her time to say a few words which she no doubt imagined would make believe that her mind was free from care; then profiting by an opportune moment of silence I rose to take leave. Feeling instinctively that they would want to talk to each other I thought that Kermoysan would remain. But no, he rose with me. As Mme. Herdevin extended her hand, however, it seemed to me that he held it one or two seconds longer and pressed it a little stronger than mere politeness required.

We left the house together. In the street—the Herdevins lived at the lower end of the Avenue du Trocadéro—as we were going towards

the Alma bridge, I could not resist the temptation to exclaim:

"What injustice that such a lout ——"

I did not finish the sentence. Kermoysan understood it. Instead of taking it up at once, he walked on in silence for a few steps, gazing straight before him. Then he said, dropping his voice to a tone that was almost confidential:

"I believe she adores her children!"

Then as we had arrived at the Place de l'Alma, he asked:

"Do you take the Avenue Montaigne?"

"Yes, I am going to the Madeleine."

"And I over the bridge. I have business on the other side of the water."

We shook hands and he strode rapidly away.

A few days later I saw Mme. Herdevin at a ball to which, contrary to custom, her husband had accompanied her. She appeared to me in a new aspect. She was animated, talkative, mondaine, almost coquettish, but there was something forced about it, something unnatural, that seemed to protest to her. Certain persons who go into society with the secret idea of looking for romances noted that she talked and danced a good deal with a well-known clubman, whose success with her astonished me. The Baron de Malmain was a conceited beau who affected a military air, who was of a maturity that began to wrinkle his forehead and thin the hair about his temples, and who did not even possess that negative

quality of being inoffensive that is not infrequently found in men of his stamp. In effect, although he lacked wit, he possessed a store of unkind anecdotes and stinging judgments about other people to which he had recourse whenever the occasion for showing off presented itself. So that he was listened to and created laughter, —that kind of laughter in which there is always a little hatred, a little disdain, a little pride, which is more spiteful than frivolous, which one ought not to indulge in, and which is in demand.

I confess that I did not like to see Mme. Herdevin waltzing with this individual, listening smilingly to his remarks, and replying to him in her pure, clear voice, that voice in which seemed to sound the crystal of her soul. I was not jealous, in the brutal and possessive sense of the word, but I suffered from a sentiment that was very much akin to jealousy. It seemed to me that her contact with Malmain was contaminating her, that she would no longer be the same after tolerating his arm round her waist and listening to his slander. I was relieved when he quitted her and hied elsewhere with his lady-killing gallantry; but he always returned and my uneasiness recommenced.

Once I saw Mme. Herdevin standing by Kermoysan: their attitude, looks and expression reproduced almost exactly the group which had impressed me at Mme. B———'s when I saw them together for the first time. During the few minutes

their conversation lasted I saw her again just as I liked her and I was happy, so naïve, so pure was my sentiment for her, born wholly as it was of respect and disinterested admiration. But this did not last long: the inevitable Malmain came to fetch her for a quadrille. She went at once, saluting with a smile as she did so Kermoysan, who bowed more ceremoniously than was necessary and resumed his society expression.

Kermoysan followed her with his eyes, then seeing me he took my arm, saying:

"Suppose we stroll about a bit? There is not enough air here."

He led me into a small salon where some card parties were playing, lost a few louis nervously, and returned to the ball-room. I kept beside him. His gaze wandered uneasily over the couples coming and going until it fell upon Mme. Herdevin. She was seated, and listening to Malmain who, standing, was half bending over her.

"Decidedly, it is too warm here," said Kermoysan. "I'm off. Au revoir!"

Hardly had he gone when M. Herdevin came up to me. His coarse, fat face, red with the heat, expressed profound ennui. Knowing hardly anybody in a set that he did not frequent, he had wandered like a lost soul all the evening, between the ball-room and the card room, where play was too moderate for his taste.

"Not very amusing, your set," he said with a yawn. "Nain Jaune at two sous a time, at family

tables. It would give anybody the hump. And the heat's simply stifling. I've had enough of it. I'm off to my club, I like that better. Good night."

His wife who without appearing to do so had watched his every movement saw him go, and left immediately afterward.

And I had the very distinct impression that between these three something had passed—an abortive drama, a scene of jealousy, ruse, or lying, something at all events, the details of which I should not have cared to go into, even had I been able.

CHAPTER IV.

"In the drawing room of a friend of Mme. B———'s, at the close of an afternoon, three or four women, among them Mme. Herdevin. Tea is over. Conversation languishes and is about to drop when Malmain makes his appearance. He is smartly dressed, sparkling, triumphant; even from his air it is easy to see that he brings a bit of new gossip, some spiteful chit-chat calculated to cause amusement for five minutes. He has hardly taken a seat ere he says:

"'Have you read the article in the *Spectateur* about Kermoysan?'

"The ladies look at each other and answer that they have not.

"'An article that hits the nail on the head, you can take my word for it, and that you may be sure will be talked about.'

"Thereupon he takes a copy of the *Spectateur* from his pocket, a much creased copy that must have been used several times, and in his sharp voice which his wicked joy renders sharper than usual, he reads the most biting passages. Gall, venom, calumny and abuse—one of those mixtures, humiliating to the human species, which base envy alone could have prompted; at the

end of it the little known name of Maxime Lucand.

"'Who is Maxime Lucand?' somebody asks.

"'A young writer,' explains Malmain, 'who has great talent as a pamphleteer. You see, ladies, how your idol is handled.'

"He has been listened to with murmurs, with *frou frous*, with little smothered laughs. A voice in a tone of protest exclaims:

"'Oh! our idol!'

"And Malmain says exultingly:

"'What! Going to give him up already? He! he! It's just as well that the great favorites of the ladies should get a little lesson now and then. The birch is good for illustrious backs. And our dear friend positively needed it.'

"I wait for a voice to be raised in defence of the absent one; but the ladies listen and smile, not one thinks of intervening. Involuntarily my eyes seek Mme. Herdevin. She is gazing straight before her as though she did not hear, with tightly pressed lips and an icy air; she drums upon her knees with her fingers while Malmain continues with an exasperating affectation of bonhomie:

"'There is exaggeration in the article, no doubt, a little exaggeration; but on the whole, he! he! yes, on the whole, it may be well founded, you see. To say that Kermoysan has no talent is absurd, isn't it? He has talent and everybody recognizes the fact; still, he himself

is more convinced of it than anybody else, and above all he imagines he has more than he possesses. Don't you think he always has the air of posing for his statue? He looks as if he could already see himself cast in bronze with a wreath upon his brow.'

"They laugh: and one of them showing her pretty teeth, replies:

"'That is true, there is something of such an air about him.'

"Thus encouraged Malmain resumes in more animated tone:

"'Only the other day, at the first performance of *L'Etrangère*, I met him in the foyer of the Comédie. He was strutting about with the air, —with the air of a king in his palace. One would have thought that he had written the piece. Somebody stopped him, to ask for an address, I think. He went to write it on one of his cards, but couldn't find his pencil. His interlocutor didn't have one either. I noticed their embarrassment and offered him mine.

"He used it, and returned it with a 'thank you'—oh! one of those Louis XIV. or Olympian Jupiter thank yous. Then a queer idea came into my head. I said to him: 'This is now an historical pencil!' And he didn't see that I was mocking him!'

"I can stand it no longer, and venture timidly:

"'Are you quite sure?'

"'Parbleu!' replies Malmain, who hardly

notices my interruption, and he falls to picking Kermoysan to pieces again more bitterly, with more incisive and calumnious spitefulness:

"'What will he do about this article? Fight? I doubt it. I don't think he's a hero. People say things about him——'

"This is too much. Trembling with anger I ask:

"'What things?'

"My question is put in a tone of such firmness that Malmain cannot avoid answering it. Astonished at this unexpected intervention he looks at me, becomes embarrassed, and stammers:

"'Things—well, things——'

"'Say what they are!'

"'Oh, one can't tell everything, you know.'

"'That is a pity, I am sure, for it would be seen that there is nothing about Kermoysan that needs to be kept secret.'

"Then I speak out warmly, wax eloquent. The ladies listen, somewhat astonished at this explosion, a trifle ashamed, perhaps, at having listened to Malmain, and quite ready to rally to Kermoysan again. When I finish my brave tirade Malmain looks at me haughtily, and says with a superior smile:

"'I was not aware that Kermoysan had any friends. This is greatly to his credit!'

"But I have attained my object: he changes the subject. A moment later Mme. Herdevin

rises to take her departure. She holds out her hand to me, a thing she has never done before, and, I do not know whether I am mistaken, but it seems to me that the pressure of her fingers and the look in her eyes thank me.

" I no longer listen to the conversation, and I leave in turn animated by a juvenile hate against Malmain and very proud of the little rôle I have played."

CHAPTER V.

It was in my famous note book that I found the details of the foregoing little scene, insignificant enough in itself. However, in spite of the time that has since elapsed they probably would have remained in my memory, because they were connected with the graver incident which followed, and in which I was directly concerned.

Having dined at a restaurant, I had returned for the purpose of donning evening dress, to the very modest two-roomed apartment I occupied on the sixth floor of a big house in the Rue Lafayette. I was engaged in curling my moustache—an operation about which I was the more particular because it would not have been indispensable—when I heard a knock at the door. I opened it without stopping to put on my coat, and drew back in astonishment at sight of Kermoysan who never before had called upon me. He was accompanied by an elderly man of haughty appearance, tightly buttoned up in a frock coat and wearing a goatee.

"My friend, Captain Lozier," he said, introducing him.

Greatly agitated by this unexpected visit the motive of which I vaguely guessed, I bade them be seated and hurriedly put on my dress coat.

"I must ask your pardon for disturbing you at this hour," said Kermoysan, "but I have an urgent service to ask of you."

"I signified by a gesture that I was at his disposal."

He continued:

"What has brought me here is that I am going to fight Lucand."

I deemed I ought to object that there was no real necessity for such a duel; that a man in his position was not at the mercy of the first comer who might want to insult him, and besides, that he was so superior to his aggressor that he would be honoring the man too much in crossing swords with him.

"I must fight," he interrupted in a tone that admitted of no further argument.

Then, more gently, as though he felt that he nevertheless owed me some explanation:

"I am, I need hardly say, quite indifferent to this article; but were I to put up with it others would follow which might be more disagreeable to me. They can roast my books as much as they like, I don't care anything about that; but I won't permit them to talk about myself."

The captain, sitting rigidly in his arm-chair nodded approval; I bowed.

"Here is where the difficulty about the affair commences," continued Kermoysan with some hesitation. "I have reasons, particular reasons"—and he emphasized the word partic-

ular—" for desiring that nothing shall be known about this duel until it has taken place—reasons so strong that if I thought it would be impossible to prevent the report of it getting about before hand, I would rather give it up."

" But," said I, " Lucand, on the other hand, will naturally want to get all the notoriety out of it he possibly can."

" That is precisely the danger," went on Kermoysan uneasily. " After it is all over he can beat upon his big drum as much as ever he likes. What I want to do is to prevent at all costs any information about the preliminaries leaking out —newspaper paragraphs announcing that the seconds are arranging the encounter, etc."

" You will have no difficulty," I ventured, " in getting the press—— "

He interrupted me with a shrug of his shoulders:

" I cannot go the round of the papers to ask them to keep quiet. As to my adversary's seconds, they would make promises, but would not keep them. I know what the word of a Lucand and people of his kind is worth. There is, then, only one way, and that is to go quickly about the business."

" Yes, yes, very quickly," repeated the captain.

" The plan that appears most practical to me is this," continued Kermoysan. " As you will see, it can only be carried out by a great deal of

good will on the part of the seconds. Considering the pedantry natural to fencers this is a first point of some difficulty. There is a première at the Variétés to-night. Lucand certainly will be there. My seconds will hunt him up at the theatre, apprise him that I am compelled by orders from the Ministry of Marine to leave Paris on duty to-morrow and that consequently our quarrel must be settled immediately. At any rate, by no matter what pretext, they must get him to put them in communication this very evening with two of his friends among the audience. All this is possible. If the plan succeeds, the next thing will be to avoid debate with Lucand's seconds. Their conditions, whatever they may be, must be accepted, so that the encounter can take place at daybreak to-morrow. They cannot contest my position as the offended party, but if they demand concessions, give way to them. Let them have swords or pistols, whichever they want. The principal thing is that the affair shall be settled speedily and without noise."

Kermoysan had spoken rapidly, with anxious feverishness, as though to convey the impression of quickly passing incidents. I did not reply at once. However inexperienced in such matters I might be, I hesitated to accept a rôle so passive, and to so completely remove all freedom of action in an affair which after all might take a serious turn. He perceived my hesitation.

"Except the captain," he said, with a tinge of pleading in his voice, "I have no friends intimate enough to accept such a rôle without asking me for explanations, and I cannot furnish any. Moreover, I should be embarrassed to find among my acquaintances anybody to whom I could confide this necessity, this absolute necessity, for acting without delay. I thought of you, because I know that you like me, and because I believe you to be discreet and generous. It is a very great service I am asking of you, much greater than you think."

I might have been flattered by such confidence; but I was especially moved by Kermoysan's tone, by the agitation which he tried to control, by a sort of pained anguish which I did not for an instant have the idea of attributing to the material fact of the duel. I accepted.

He thanked me with effusion.

"Do not be uneasy as to the outcome of the encounter," he said. "I can still fence fairly well and can hit the bull's eye at thirty paces. You will see that all will go well."

Thereupon he rose. The captain, still mute, followed suit. We walked down my six flights and proceeded together towards the Théâtre des Variétés. Kermoysan shook hands with us, repeating in pressing tones as he did so, his recommendation:

"Above all, be quick about it."

Then he went off to wait for us at the Café Cardinal.

I was not without inquietude as to the manner in which the silent captain would conduct the negotiations. Contrary to my expectation, however, he went about them very well indeed, with an apparent brusqueness that masked considerable tact and skill, so that I had no occasion to say a single word. Lucand wanted to protest against such haste, which was not at all to his liking.

"Exigencies of the service!" said the captain.

He had no alternative but to yield. He went the round of the corridors during an entr'acte, and returned with two of his confrères whom he introduced to us, and with whom we immediately began the negotiations. They endeavored to raise a few difficulties. Faithful to his instructions the captain entered into their views without appearing to give way too readily, and in a quarter of an hour we had drawn up the procès verbal governing the conditions of the combat.

We then rejoined Kermoysan who was awaiting us with a *menthe à l'eau* in front of him.

"Capital!" he said, perusing the sheet we handed to him.

At this moment his face expressed only relief and satisfaction.

"I could not have hoped that it would have been arranged so well," he went on. "You have

acted very cleverly. Now, if you like, we will go to bed early, for we must not oversleep ourselves."

As can be imagined, I was greatly troubled. I gave up all idea of going to the social function for which I had dressed, and went home to reflect in quietness upon what had happened to me. To take part in a duel in the capacity of Kermoysan's second was unquestionably an important event for me. It had broken my chrysalis cocoon, so to speak, and would henceforth make of me something more than a mere good young man. Then, too, the fact that Kermoysan had fixed upon me was flattering in the highest degree. It seemed to me that I was about to grow in the opinion of the world, but that, meanwhile, I was becoming greater in my own esteem. To my credit, be it said, this personal side of the affair did not occupy my thoughts for long. I soon forgot my rôle to think of Kermoysan, and in recalling his words, his air, his inquietude, I came to ask myself two or three questions, that were indiscreet, perhaps, but which my curiosity could not repel.

Why this duel, that malevolent persons like Malmain could alone consider necessary? Why fight, not on account of the article itself, but in view of others which perhaps never might be written? Why this haste, this feverish haste, which some persons would not have failed to attribute to an emotion akin to fear, or at least

to a too conscious, too voluntary courage which its possessor knows can be sustained only for a certain time? On the other hand, if apprehension, however slight, entered into Kermoysan's anxiety, wherefore an indifference to the detail of conditions that amounted to positive imprudence? In reflecting upon these various whys and wherefores I had no doubt that they were connected, the one with the other, and I launched upon a series of conjectures that I flattered myself were very cleverly deducted.

"No doubt," thought I in the first place, "he desires absolutely that nothing shall become known about the affair until it is all over: this is to avert any anxiety to a person who is interested in him. . . . . That appears to me quite evident. . . . . And it is a very natural thoughtfulness which demonstrates that he has a tender and delicate soul, a trait well worthy of one whose heart is as noble as his talent is distinguished."

As I dwelt upon this idea which led me to a few contingent reflections, a suspicion suddenly entered my mind:

"What if it was not out of pure tenderness that he insisted upon these precautions! What if he were actuated by a preoccupation of another kind? What if, for instance, he feared lest the person whom he so dreaded to alarm might not be able to hide the anxiety the duel would occasion? What if the encounter appeared to him dangerous, not to his life, but

to a secret more precious than life, to an equilibrium the establishment and maintenance of which had been his chief, his constant care?"

The more I thought about it the more plausible this suspicion appeared to me, especially when I came to connect it with the alarm Kermoysan had manifested at the possibility of further articles being published.

"As he himself has said," I thought, "it is not criticism, however violent, of his literary work that he dreads. If he so greatly fears attacks upon himself it cannot be merely through modesty which, however legitimate, would in this particular case be exaggerated; it is because he has a weak point through which he is afraid he will be reached."

Putting these conjectures together, I concluded that André Kermoysan was actuated by affection, profound, culpable, complicated and secret, which was never absent from his thoughts, and in view of which he calculated all his actions, even those which apparently were in no way related thereto. Thus was explained not only his somewhat strange conduct during the evening, but also his renunciation of his former life of amusement, the austerity of his present conduct, and his habitual indifference to all that went on around him. Then he seemed to me to issue from the sort of mysterious penumbra in which I had previously always seen him, and I

fancied that I began to decipher the unknown characters engraved on his brow.

"And Mme. B—— asserts that we no longer know how to love!" I exclaimed aloud, happy at and satisfied with the little romance I had woven upon a real theme.

Thereupon I went to bed, after setting my alarm clock for half past four.

The latter was a very unnecessary precaution. All night in half dreams I witnessed the coming duel, and always I would see Kermoysan lying on the ground, a ghastly wound in his breast, his eyes dimmed by the mist of death. He would call me to him, his lips would move, he would seek to tell me something, a secret the anguish of which would bring back for a moment the brightness to his eyes, but although I made every effort to do so I could not hear his words. Two or three times the face of Mme. Herdevin would enter into my nightmare, vaguely, indistinctly, but I was never able to determine why or wherefore she was there. Then these visions would vanish; I would relight my candle only to see that the interminable nightmare had lasted but a few minutes.

Impatient, at last, at not being able to rid myself of these sinister dreams I rose and took a book to calm myself pending the time appointed.

On leaving my room I met Captain Lozier in the hallway.

"Feared you might oversleep yourself," he said touching his hat.

"I haven't closed my eyes," I responded.

"Don't be afraid! . . . Known him since he was a child. . . . Very brave," he chopped between his teeth.

"The doctor?" I asked, unconsciously imitating his laconicism.

"He'll follow," was the reply.

And I did not hear the sound of his voice again until we reached Kermoysan's.

Kermoysan was perfectly calm, without the slightest affectation. In the carriage he spoke little, but the few sentences he did utter showed that his mind was quite at ease. There was a dreamy look in his eyes I really believe that he was thinking of something else than his duel. It was no doubt the same constant thought, that thought which separated him from others, that isolated him as a prison, that I fancied I had deciphered the day before, and which now became clouded in new mysteries.

We arrived at the place appointed before Lucand and his friend, who, however, did not keep us waiting along. Lucand appeared nervous, or at least more excited than he ought to have been. He watched with ill-disguised attention the preparations which the seconds went about in the usual and prescribed way, and of which Kermoysan on the other hand took no notice. It was

the captain who gave the word for the duel to begin, with the traditional:

"Allez, messieurs!"

At the same time, without taking his eyes off them, he repeated the reassuring remark he had made on greeting me:

"Very brave. . . . Sure of him. . . . Nothing to fear!"

I stood in need of this assurance, for I was so agitated that I could not conceal my emotion.

However, it was soon over. The two adversaries had not crossed swords more than a minute when Lucand, pricked in the shoulder, dropped his weapon. His doctor went up to him, declared that the wound placed him in a state of inferiority, and it only remained for us to draw up the procès-verbal. As we were finishing it Lucand, whose wound had been dressed, approached Kermoysan with outstretched hand. Kermoysan looked at him disdainfully, put his hands behind him and walked off while Lucand made a gesture of anger and hatred.

"I ought to have shaken hands with him," said Kermoysan an instant later. "He will recommence and——"

He broke off, remained pensive, then concluded with a gesture of uneasiness,

"One ought never to have any enemies."

I could not resist connecting these words with the apprehension of further attacks he had expressed the previous day, and again thought my

deductions must be very near to the truth. These were strengthened by a little incident.

We were to lunch together, at Voisin's, I think it was. In passing a news-stand Kermoysan stopped the carriage to buy a Figaro. He opened it, ran his eye over the column of "Echoes," and uttered an exclamation in which there was more discouragement than anger:

"Ah! what a nuisance!"

At the same time he showed us a paragraph in which the encounter that had just taken place, was announced.

"What does it matter, since it's all over?" asked the Captain naïvely.

"But the procès-verbal will not appear until the evening's papers are out," said Kermoysan.

This remark had escaped him. He bit his lips with vexation, was silent and appeared to be absorbed in deep thought.

"I must ask your pardon," he said at last, "but I must absolutely ——"

He interrupted himself like a man who hesitates before making up his mind, then having decided went on:

"Yes, I positively must go home."

He gave his address to the coachman and lapsed into silence. He seemed much more anxious, much more nervous, than when we set out and did not hide or did not succeed in hiding, his annoyance.

We waited for him in the carriage while he

went upstairs. I tried to get into conversation with the captain.

"It passed off very well," I ventured.

"Yes. . . . Very well. . . . Said so," he replied, and I could only get monosyllables out of him.

Kermoysan at length came down, carrying a book wrapped in paper. He hailed an empty cab, handed the parcel to the driver, showed him the address, and I heard him repeat twice to the man

"You will say that you met me as I was coming back from the Bois—as I was coming back from the Bois· you understand?"

The cabman appeared to understand, and whipped up his horse. Kermoysan rejoined us.

"Let us go to luncheon," he said. "I am dying of hunger. You also, I imagine."

And he endeavored to forget his preoccupation.

"He no doubt has found means to reassure the person he wanted to," I thought.

Anyhow he ate with a good appetite and conversed with animation.

CHAPTER VI.

Following these incidents a semi-intimacy that abolished in part the difference in our ages was established between Kermoysan and myself. I saw him often. On his part, without issuing from that reserve which had ended by becoming a trait of his character, he was more cordial to me. He spoke to me with a certain freedom of his work, his reading, his books, but never of himself. When we met in society he came to me with outstretched hand and a smile that was almost affectionate. When I rang at his door Adolphe received me with that air of confidence that old servants reserve for friends of their masters. Not infrequently Kermoysan, puffing but kindly of manner, climbed my six flights of stairs. Nevertheless he remained a stranger to me, while a doubt prevented me from freely enjoying his friendship; I was always a little afraid that he accorded it as being due because he was under an obligation to me.

By a singular coincidence my relations with Mme. Herdevin also became more familiar, in a similar way. She now treated me as a friend, a very young friend whom one esteems above his years. Our conversations when I called upon her or met her in society became more familiar,

free from conventional commonplaces. I thus realized my dream on first seeing her: I entered into her circle of intimates, I breathed her air, I was able to enjoy her presence, her voice, her charm, that charm to which I was still subjected, and which it would still have been impossible for me to explain. But the nearer I got to her, the more the sentiments with which she inspired me became modified: the nuance of love which at the outset tinted them with a vague hope, had given place to an enthusiastic friendship, an absolute and entirely disinterested devotion, as though I had understood that never should I exist for her, that never would she play any part in my life any more than I in hers, that to the end we should remain strangers whose destinies would now and then be slightly mingled by the caprice of fate in episodes the meaning of which might very well escape me.

On the other hand I could scarcely think of her without at once thinking of Kermoysan. Their two figures, their two names, were associated in my mind although nothing, absolutely nothing, indicated that there existed any particular tie between them. On the contrary, Kermoysan visited her less frequently than I did. It is true their conversation, when they isolated themselves for an instant in the corner of some drawing-room, seemed to absorb all their attention; but they never remained together longer than a minute or two, and often they seemed to

avoid rather than seek each other. My impression was none the less acute. I ought to say, though, that it was not definable. I never went so far as to suspect that they wore one for the other that mysterious thought which I read on their brows.

However closely one observes other people, one sees but little. I flattered myself that I was being treated as a friend by Mme. Herdevin, and at that very moment she was going through a crisis about which everybody was talking while I knew nothing about it. It was Mme. B——— who enlightened me.

"You are still enthusiastic about Mme. Herdevin?" she queried one day with that kindly irony which she sometimes assumed when talking to me.

"The better I know her, the more enthusiastic I become," was my reply.

"Ah! you know her better," she said, accentuating her irony. "Do you know that you are very fortunate? . . . . These young people! . . . . . I, who have known her for ten years, know her less and less. Do you often call upon her"

"As often as I decently can."

"That means two or three times a week?"

I reddened as I replied:

"Not quite as often as that."

"But about that," observed Mme. B——— slyly.

"And you have never noticed anything particular?" she asked gazing at me with a slightly taunting look.

This unexpected question astonished me.

"Particular?" I repeated, trying to think what she might mean. "No, nothing; I think not."

I added:

"M. Herdevin is never there; you yourself told me that this would be the case. Now and then I have seen her little girl who is ill, and who is much with her, but whom a maid carries away as soon as anybody calls."

My old friend shook her head.

"Is that all you have seen?" she exclaimed. "A husband who is never there, and a child who is ill. Nothing more. Well it is a real case of 'eyes has he and sees not.'"

When one is young one rather likes to be considered perspicacious. Nevertheless I did not feel mortified at having thus been caught, but it seemed to me that anguish seized my heart with the sudden fear of a revelation that would spoil Mme. Herdevin in my sight.

"Is there, then, something else?" I cried. "What is it?"

There was in this cry which escaped me such alarm and naïveté that Mme. B—— could not help laughing. But her laughter soon died away and an expression of tender pity came into her face.

"Oh! dramas," she said sadly, "family dramas."

"Do you know about them?"

"Everybody does; nothing else is spoken of."

This time I did feel a trifle mortified in my amour-propre as an observer. But curiosity, or rather interest, got the better of every other sentiment.

"I haven't heard anything said———" I began.

Mme B——— interrupted me:

"And 'ears has he and hears not!'"

I capitulated.

"Yes," I said, "I must acknowledge that I am not very smart."

She did not keep me begging any longer.

"Ah!" she began. "The poor woman is very unhappy! You know her husband is an abominable man?"

"I know it."

"But you don't know how abominable he is. He torments her, he neglects her, and he deceives her—that goes without saying. He robs her a bit, too, I think, for she had a very handsome fortune which he handles as if it belonged to him. She supports everything without complaint. You wouldn't dream of what he has imagined now. He wants positively to get a divorce!"

Mme. B——— put into this word all the horror that persons of her age and class profess for

divorce, which the Naquet law had just instituted. I could not resist the temptation to show her that upon this point I differed with her.

"Well," said I, "I think that if I were in her place I should ask nothing better."

My old friend menaced me with her fan:

"Be quiet! You have no principles, you young people of to-day; nothing is sacred for you."

Then in a graver voice:

"Besides, in her case it is not a question of theoretical opinion. You forget she is a mother. However unhappy she may be she will bear everything for her children's sake. Two little girls—think of it! She knows only too well how it passes. In the end it is always the woman who is in the wrong, and the children suffer from it in the future—all their lives."

"It seems to me, though, that if she suffers too much——"

Mme. B——— looked at me.

"A mother," she said, "never suffers so that she will not take upon herself the ill that menaces her children. And then, that is not all. You pretend to know Mme. Herdevin: I see that you know precious little about her. You do not know to what point she is a 'woman' in the best sense of the word. Now, women—good women—have certain delicate instincts and sentiments that never will adapt themselves to your laws, even though you profess to make these laws for

women. That to which we cling more than to happiness, more than to anything else, is the right to keep our sentiments and our life for ourselves. There is not one of us—I allude to those who count for anything—who is not ready to sacrifice the peace of her existence to avert a scandal. That is certainly how Mme. Herdevin feels; of this you can be sure. For that matter, she has told me so—for she confides in me sometimes. Yes, the other day, in confirming the rumors about her family troubles that have been circulating, she said in substance this:

"'I will never give in, whatever he may do. I have a certain ideal of propriety from which I will not swerve at any price. I will not have anything in my life that can give rise to discussion. I should die were I to see my name in the papers and to know that it is in everybody's mouth.'

"This is how she spoke to me, and it is truly the language of a woman. What do you think about it, monsieur the psychologist?"

Feeling I must say something I observed:

"Then it is the religion of silence?"

"That is it exactly," said Mme. B——, "the religion of silence. It is a religion that is common to all people of heart. And no one knows the heavy sacrifices which it sometimes imposes."

At this instant the memory of Kermoysan's duel came into my mind, although there was no

visible correlation between the efforts which he had made to keep his encounter with Lucand from becoming known and the sacrifice which the fear of scandal cost Mme. Herdevin. It came to me so rapidly that I almost blurted out a remark I should have regretted. I checked myself in time, however, and asked instead:

"But why is he so bent upon getting a divorce, this horrible man? Is his wife in his way?"

"Not in the least. He doesn't exist for her. She allows him all the freedom he can desire. So much so that one might think she sees nothing he does, or rather that she doesn't see him himself, that she ignores him utterly."

"Well, then?"

"Can't you guess?"

"No."

"Decidedly, you don't know any more about men than you do about women. Come, now; reflect a little. How is it that a man of his stamp can want a divorce?"

"From motives of interest?"

"That might be, of course, but it isn't. Herdevin wants a divorce so that he can marry a good-for-nothing hussy . . . Yes, that's it, purely and simply . . . You see, there is a justice. Rascals such as he always end by getting hold of a woman who is even worse than themselves. That is precisely what has happened in this instance. He wants to get rid of his wife for the benefit of the jade who has been

fleecing him for two or three years and now that she is gorged with his money wants his name as well. That's how it is. What do you think of it ?"

At this moment a visitor was announced and the conversation changed. I took but little part in it. I was thinking upon what I had just heard. "What!" said I to myself, "there are so many sorrows borne daily, such ceaseless resignation in an existence with which I am more or less in contact, and I have noticed nothing, seen not a trace, not a sign that would have led me to suspect it! Ah! the religion of silence is a fine and strong religion! It tries its adepts sorely: it tempers them, it must ennoble them."

And I added:

"But one never knows all the secrets it envelops in its mysteries. Who knows but what this poor woman has other unknown sorrows—or perchance joys, joys as mysterious as her suffering, or even better dissembled, by which she is consoled ?"

CHAPTER VII.

One day I called at Kermoysan's to thank him for a service he had rendered me in connection with a book I was publishing. As usual honest Adolphe opened the door, but instead of beaming upon me as he ordinarily did, he wore a very disconsolate air.

"Ah! monsieur," he said, shaking his venerable head, "what a misfortune!"

"What is the matter?" I demanded in alarm.

"What is the matter, monsieur? The matter is that my master is going away . . . And to such countries! We who were so quiet and comfortable!"

He added, lowering his voice:

"It's far better to be the servant of a good master than to be in the service of the government, I can tell you."

I did not wait to answer him, but hurried in. Kermoysan, in fez and smoking jacket, notwithstanding that it was nearly three o'clock, was putting his study in order.

"It is true that you are going away?" I asked as I shook hands with him.

"Yes . . . . order from the Ministry . . . . aboard the *Triton*."

"And—you don't care about it?"

"Not much. I had some business to attend to, proofs of a volume to read. Really, I should very much have preferred to spend the winter here."

He added:

"I have got to go to Senegal. I don't like Africa much."

"You would have preferred to go somewhere else?"

"Yes, without doubt, elsewhere."

Then, shrugging his shoulders, and without noticing the fact that he was contradicting what he had just said he continued:

"Besides, it was time I did travel a little. One gets rusty sticking always in the same place."

He was more absent-minded, more close than ever. Seeing that it was disagreeable to him to speak about his departure, I broached the subject of the business that had brought me there. He scarcely listened to my thanks, and merely remarked in a tone of the utmost indifference:

"You have succeeded? Good. So much the better! So much the better!"

I saw that he wished to be alone and took my leave.

"I hope to see you again," he said as he showed me to the door.

And it seemed to me that he said, on the contrary, such discouragement was there in his voice;

" Come, or don't come, it's all the same to me, for everything is all the same to me, now!"

The news of his approaching departure spread rapidly among his circle of friends, and much regret was expressed. Why could not the Ministry leave him alone? Why should it have fixed upon Kermoysan, who had friends and talent, when there were at its disposal so many unknown and unimportant officers who were only too ready to go globe trotting?

" The Government is always doing things like that," remarked Mme. B———, in accord with Adolphe on this point. " One should never be at the Government's orders!"

The time passed rapidly. Kermoysan, who was more sought after than ever, scarcely had time to make his preparations for the voyage. He no longer complained at having to go; on the contrary,

" It is my profession," he said. " I love it. Australia, Africa, America, what does it matter? One is well off wherever one goes."

Occasionally, though, he lapsed into pensive silence, from which he aroused himself as soon as he saw that he was observed; then he talked too much, as people do who not only seek to hide their real thoughts, but also the fact that they are thinking of anything in particular. His own, undecipherable thought was ever there.

On the eve of the day fixed for his departure Mme. B———gave a dinner in his honor to

which only a few of his personal friends were invited. I was among them, and found myself seated next to Mme. Herdevin. She was less talkative, more distracted, more absent than customary. Vainly I sought to interest her; she scarcely replied, and then only with effort. Now and then she appeared to follow the general conversation, but I could see that she was not really listening and that her air of interest was assumed in order to give greater freedom to her thoughts. Seated almost opposite to her, Kermoysan spoke spasmodically, without any animation. At one time, during one of those intervals of silence which always occur in assemblies when the conversation languishes, I heard him reply in about the following terms to some remark of his neighbor.

"There is no use in disguising the fact, Madame, the hour of departure is always a serious one. I have never started, even on a short voyage, without feeling some emotion. It is as though the thread of your destiny were being broken; you know well enough that it will be knotted together again, or, at least, that it probably will be, but you do not know how. One would have to be frivolous indeed, to set out without experiencing some inquietude in face of the unknown, and very insensible to leave without regrets."

I looked at Mme. Herdevin. She had lowered

her eyes. Turning toward me, while the conversation revived around the table, she said:

" M. Kermoysan must be blasé as to these emotions: he has experienced them so often!"

Her voice, it seemed to me, was slightly stifled. I was about to respond with some commonplace remark when I heard at the other side of the table, the hoarse laugh of Herdevin, who for a wonder had accompanied his wife. My neighbor turned away with an expression so pained, so tragical, that the remark died on my lips.

In the smoking room, where Mme. B—— sent those of her guests who wanted to enjoy a cigar, Herdevin buttonholed Kermoysan and asked him what he thought of negresses.

" For there's nothing else out there, eh ?" he queried.

Kermoysan answered coldly:

" Their skin is oily, I have nothing to do with them."

" For my part—— " said Herdevin,——

And he began to explain with much gesticulation and laughter his opinion upon women and his theory of love. Kermoysan listened to him with ill-disguised impatience; he was becoming visibly restless. Finally, he interrupted him, saying with his loftiest air, and with a coldness that was positively rude:

" There are as many manners of judging women as there are different qualities of men."

And they went on to talk about Senegal.

On returning to the drawing room I noticed that Mme. Herdevin was very pale, and could hardly keep up. Mme. B——, in fact, went over to her and inquired affectionately:

"Are you unwell, dear?'

"I have a bit of a headache, but it does not amount to much: it is nothing to speak of," Mme. Hendevin assured her.

Her face which was becoming drawn in an expression of pain that amounted to agony, belied this assurance.

One of the charms of Mme. B——'s large salon was that it was made up of recesses arranged with infinite art with screens, easy chairs and little tables in such wise that a general conversation was impossible. Mme. B—— detested a general conversation. Witty people, she declared, were always a little more stupid when they spoke for the gallery than when en tête-à-tête, and that, besides, it was next to impossible to get more than four people together without there being at least one fool among them. She thought she was making it more pleasant for her guests by dividing them up into little parties. Groups therefore were formed. I was unlucky; I was made the victim of Herdevin. He forced me into a corner of a two-place sofa, ensconced himself at his ease and without regard to my comfort, crossed his legs, and began to talk about

his horses, his affairs, his clubs and his mistresses.

Fortunately he was one of those persons who are quite willing to do all the talking themselves and do not exact replies. Now and then I grunted approval, nodded my head with an attentive air, uttered an occasional 'yes,' and he was perfectly satisfied. It got at last so that his talk did not disturb me more than the recitation of a monologue or the singing of an air from an opera, and I thought only of vague things and watched, not without envy, the other groups.

I could not see Kermoysan. "Has he already left?" I asked myself as I looked around. He had not, and at last I caught sight of him. He was in one of the angles of the salon, seated beside Mme. Herdevin on a sofa similar to that in which I was forcibly detained. They were partly hidden by a small English screen of pale green polished wood and the large leaves of the plants in a jardinière. They were practically isolated in this quiet corner, and thanks to the customs of the house could stay there without attracting too much attention. They were talking slowly, without looking at each other. Often Mme. Herdevin's face almost disappeared behind her fan. They were in the shadow, but a lamp having been moved the light fell suddenly upon Kermoysan's visage. With an instinctive gesture he passed his hand over his eyes and turned his face away. It did not last two seconds, but

I was gazing at him then, and how could I not have been struck by his expression? His impassibility had vanished: another, an unknown man had suddenly appeared to me, a man with an anguished, passionate, sorrowful face, a face of indescribable agony and despair that was at once hidden in the shadow. I was so astonished that I asked myself whether I had seen clearly or whether his features had not been deformed by a sudden dimness of my sight. Then I thought:

"I guessed aright: they are very intimate. Perhaps she is his confidant. Perhaps he is confiding a last message to her, is forgetting himself for an instant and showing himself as he really is."

About eleven o'clock M. Herdevin pulled out his watch and exclaimed:

"Oh! oh!"

I understood that probably having an appointment to keep he had decided to terminate the monologue that our conversation had practically amounted to. He rose; I hastened to follow his example.

"Where is my wife?" he asked, looking around.

Then perceiving her:

"Ah! there she is, with the lion of the fête. Let's go and disturb them."

Taking my arm he went towards her. They saw us coming. They had recovered their calmness or had had time to pull themselves together,

for I observed nothing but what was perfectly natural in their attitude.

" You know it's getting late," said M. Herdevin to his wife. " I'd like to be getting home."

She rose as though impelled by a spring.

" Let us go home then," she replied.

She turned to her companion.

" Monsieur Kermoysan," she said, " I wish you a pleasant voyage—and I bid you au revoir."

Kermoysan, who had risen at the same time bowed.

" Thank you, Madame, thank you," he said. " Au revoir."

There was nothing in all this that could have excited the slightest comment; the tone, the words, the gestures, differed in no way from those usually employed in similar circumstances between persons who know each other sufficiently to manifest a little interest, if only out of pure politeness. What set me thinking was precisely this apparent banalité of their farewell. It contrasted too sharply with the emotion whose traces I had just before surprised. I was in a measure forced to say to myself:

" If they are close friends, they hide their friendship well."

And for the first time a definite suspicion crossed my mind.

I dismissed it. Mme. Herdevin lived in the light of day: there could be no mystery in her existence. Besides, how could I admit that it

was possible for a liaison to exist between two persons whom I saw constantly, without its having been perceived by me, any more than by any other of their common friends? Things like that are always divined.

Kermoysan went the rounds of the groups, exchanging in all tranquility, and with the politeness of a perfect society man a few remarks with each. One would have thought that he had forgotten all about his journey or that he took pleasure in prolonging his last evening as much as possible. He was among the last to leave. I accompanied him, and bade him adieu beside the cab that he had hailed.

"Shall we not hear from you?" I asked.

"Most certainly; I shall write to my friends," he replied without hesitation.

"Do you count me among them?" I asked again.

"Do not doubt it, I pray."

There was an almost affectionate accent in his voice. He added:

"Do not be surprised to get a long letter from me."

We shook hands. His cab whisked him away in the night, while I went off afoot towards the Rue Lafayette.

I needed to walk and to breathe the cold air, for I was positively moved. There are some people who weep at every funeral, even at those which they attend by chance. Well, in those

days, leave takings easily had the same effect upon me. I know of nothing more sad. There is something bitter, cruel, heart-breaking in the thought of that distance which will increase a little more every day between you and the person who is going away to be swallowed up by space. Separation has not, like death, the excuse of fatality. It will be maintained that, on the other hand, it leaves the hope of meeting again. Poor hope, which is so feeble when the time for parting comes, which opens the door to so many mortal pangs! I liked Kermoysan too much not to feel this emotion keenly. Then when I had overcome it, I thought of the unknown woman he loved, for I had no doubt of the existence or of the violence of this sentiment with which it pleased me to credit him. What a scene must have been the farewell between them! Did he preserve any of his sang-froid, he who lost it when merely speaking of *her?* Farewells, tears, despair, furious and vain revolts against destiny, all the depth of love's distress. Alas! I was far from suspecting, what later I found was the case, that this scene had been enacted under my eyes, that the formal *au revoir* exchanged in my presence was the only one they could permit their hearts!

CHAPTER VIII.

Generally the absent are soon forgotten: too many small cares daily have claims on our attention for it to fly off to the other end of the world after a wanderer, especially as there are always about us people eager to take the places which departures have vacated. This however was not the case as far as Kermoysan was concerned. Although he was very far away he was not out of mind. His enemies had not laid down their arms, and Malmain never missed an opportunity to exercise his venomous tongue at his expense. His friends not only preserved their whole affection for him, but gave such a large place to him in their conversations, that sometimes he seemed to be present. His name moreover appeared from time to time in the reviews as though to keep alive the memory of it. Under his well known pseudonym were published impressions of his travels, in which the descriptions of the places he visited held a smaller place than those of his state of mind, now tender, now bizarre.

I kept a few of these fragments which have not been collected in volume form. The following is a specimen:

"The sea flees, always changing, always the same. It ripples in shivers of infinite tints of blue to the edge of the inaccessible horizon where linger at eventide the chimerical conflagrations of the setting sun. Kindly night descends, starless, sometimes. I am at my post on the poop, gazing into the mystery which surrounds me, inspiring with the full force of my lungs the salt, cool air, listening to the monotonous wash, wash, wash of the rolling vessel. For awhile I pace to and fro; then stand still, motionless. By degrees my immobility grows into rigidity, as though an outside force had stopped the action of my nerves and muscles, as though I were hypnotized by the distant, dominant gaze of an invisible eye. Then all sensation is lost. I am plunged into a nothingness, as it were, of which I am vaguely conscious, a nothingness that absorbs my senses, while the most secret part of my being continues to live with a life intense and multiplied, in the yonder of space and time, evoking minutes long passed that can never return, calling to others, yet unknown, with an intensity of desire which, for a second, clothes them with a fantastic reality that however vanishes then and there. It seems to me that I am folding up, that I am shrinking, that I am contracting; my feet no longer feel the deck that bears me, my hands no longer feel the bulwark upon which they rest, my eyes no longer distinguish the night. All that is me concen-

trates into a single spot, into a burning internal centre that consumes me. Is it suffering or joy? I know not, oh! I know not; but I would live again forever, to all eternity, these hours which must resemble the ecstasies of mystics or the dreams of opium eaters. Sail on, O ship, come unknown shores, come trailing plants of the tropics, come great, red, unnamed butterflies, come the new landscapes that await me; I carry within me flowers more beautiful, horizons more vast, a world of thoughts that beggars words, that I express not, but amid which I can wander and lose myself more surely than in virgin forests, in an inebriation sweeter than that caused by the most marvellous perfumes."

And later:

"I have loved the scenes of the land. Erstwhile my eyes feasted to satiety upon the play of the light, the brilliancy of the flowers, the majesticness of the lines, the grandeur or charm of landscapes. I loved, too, the sounds of silence in the solitudes: at times my heart dilated with an infinite joy although there was nothing to make it glad save the sweet, mysteriously sympathetic influences of nature. This joy is no longer known to me. I am, alas! no longer the slave, the happy slave, of those fugacious impressions which the senses impart to us, and which a mere puff of the breeze effaces! I hold towards the external world a bitter independence from which I cannot deliver myself. I belong to my

thoughts. It is from my own being that arise those images the contemplation of which fills me with ecstasy. It is no longer the varied, capricious and beautiful forms of nature; it is memories, hopes, frail and ever ready to vanish, that I retain, that I savor, that I caress. These fugitive sentiments assume in my mind I know not what character of eternity, of an eternity more lasting than that of things which survive us, than that of oceans which never run dry, of rivers whose waters are ever renewed, of continents that withstand the quakings of the globe. Thus I travel through unknown lands without seeing anything save what is reflected in my internal mirror."

And again:

"God! . . . . I will believe in Him. He must exist for me. I need that He should exist. I see Him, I feel Him, not in the splendor of terrestrial scenery where some coarse minds seek Him, but in my very self, far beyond my thoughts, whose monotonous play recommences each morning, when my dreams end. By a slow path, tortuous, strewn with obstacles, I advance towards Him. The insignificance of the world brings me nearer to Him. Peradventure am I already nearer to Him than to the sands in which my feet sink, to the waters into which I plunge that I may feel their coolness. I call to Him with all my thirst of eternity. I would feel myself in His hand: there I should be free from so many trammels that weigh me down! And

lo! my heart bursts forth into song, into inexpressible canticles."

Neither in substance nor in form did these exalted effusions resemble anything previously written by Kermoysan. They therefore caused not a little surprise to those who read them and gave rise to lively discussion upon his state of mind which everybody defined in his own way. I remember that after one of these fragments had been read someone exclaimed:

"This sort of thing leads straight to Saint Sulpice Seminary."

Malmain, who was present, added maliciously:

"Or to the Charenton Lunatic Asylum."

And, in fact, it was agreed that Kermoysan was no longer the same, and that his notes which he published without considering what effect they would produce, did betray a sort of aberration. Society is prone to render such judgments: it treats as a madman whoever departs from its habitual moderation, which, at bottom, is really nothing but indifference.

CHAPTER IX.

During Kermoysan's absence Herdevin lost large sums of money. At one time his probable failure was spoken of. But beneath the coarse pleasure-lover was a fighter, a man of energy and resource. After a few days' struggle he pulled himself round. He had changed nothing in his mode of life. All that was known was that he had sold an extensive estate that his wife owned in the Department of the Allier. She had been greatly attached to it. It was a family estate, the house in which she had been born, the garden in which she had played and the woods in which she had roamed when a child. Every summer she had been accustomed to spend several weeks there, and always looked forward to her stay with peculiar pleasure. The sale must have caused her keen sorrow, but no one seeing her always serene would have suspected it. One had to know her a little to realize what resignation there was beneath her serenity, and to hear behind the indifferent remarks she uttered with her crystal voice the moan of her wounded heart. Mme. B——— would say to me sometimes:

"Look at her; who would suspect what her life is?"

Why then did I often fancy that between her sufferings as a wife and her sufferings as a mother there was another wound in her heart, a pain that others knew nothing of? Certain details of her life contradicted such a suspicion, and one might well have wondered how in an existence so well filled there could be room for a romance; for a romance occupies a good deal of time, and entails absences from home that are difficult to justify, lies that in the end are always seen through, the complicity of a maid or of other persons. How was all this possible in her case?

At the beginning of the season Mme. Herdevin had announced to her friends that she would not be able to go out very often, as the condition of her little Martha had grown worse, and caused her the greatest anxiety; but her husband, fearing that her seclusion would be attributed to the financial embarrassment which he sought to dissemble insisted that she should go into society more often than ever. Wherefore she was to be met everywhere, bearing her hidden grief valiantly amid the small talk of the drawing rooms, watching for the chance to return to the little bedside where her heart was calling her.

It sometimes happened that I called upon her a little before her hours. On several occasions I

found her in her boudoir, where propped up with cushions on a sofa poor little Martha, withered and shrunken, her pale pain-drawn face illumined by eyes all too bright, pushed her toys away with her long, thin fingers. I shall never forget the child's look of reproach and distress as she was taken away "because visitors were coming." She made no resistance, however, and Mme. Herdevin would say:

"Ah! you cannot tell how I love her! I would like to do nothing else but care for her, attend to her myself alone, and not leave her even for a minute. She is such a dear, sweet child."

Once she added:

"I know that she cannot live."

And her eyes filled with tears.

CHAPTER X.

Unlike many travellers, Kermoysan wrote to his friends very often. These letters were of an entirely different character to the "impressions" he wrote for publication. They contained full details of what he was doing, his mode of life, and his movements, so that one could almost follow him from day to day. As may be imagined, these letters were widely circulated: fragments of them were read at five o'clock teas or at cosy soirées, and they were much commented upon and discussed. I noticed that Mme. B——— received several at brief intervals whereas Mme. Herdevin did not get a single one. I received one myself, as Kermoysan had given me to hope I would, and this under circumstances which made it of particular value.

One of those newspapers which are more eager to get news than to tell the truth published a dispatch one day announcing that the *Triton* had been lost with all on board off the Senegalian coast. The date of the wreck was given together with certain details the object of which no doubt was to impart a greater appearance of veracity to the story. No news of the disaster had been received at the Ministry of Marine, however, and this fact afforded some ground for hope. Ker-

moysan's friends were naturally extremely anxious, and for two or three days the possible loss of the *Triton* was the sole topic of conversation. The probability of the news was discussed with that mixture of interest and indifference, easily aroused pity and ready forgetfulness that go to make up social compassion. Opinion varied according to the character of those who gave expression to them. Mme. B———, optimistic as usual, scouted the idea that the report could be true, with a good faith that reassured me.

" It is impossible," she insisted. " Otherwise the Ministry would know about it."

Others shook their heads and replied:

" At the Ministry they never know anything."

Everybody, therefore, waited in suspense.

It was precisely at this time that I received a long letter from Kermoysan. On opening it I saw at once that the date was several days later than that on which the catastrophe was alleged to have occurred, and all doubt upon the matter was consequently dispelled.

Very happy to be reassured myself, and a little proud at being able to reassure his friends I hastened to call upon Mme. B———, whom Kermoysan mentioned among several other persons, including Mme. Herdevin to whom he wished to be remembered. I was fortunate enough to find the two women together. They were alone, and received me with an informality that was favorable to confidences. Mme. Her-

devin appeared to be unwell. There was in her sweet and tender eyes a glimmer of anguish, of contained despair, a rigid fixity which struck me the more inasmuch as I had not seen her for some time. I did not hesitate to attribute this change to personal cares; I even thought that she had been unburdening her mind to my old friend, so that the effect I hoped to produce would be lost. I was mistaken.

"We were talking about poor Kermoysan," said Mme. B———, as she invited me to take a seat opposite to them. "We were saying——"

Satisfied now as to the opportuneness of my news I interrupted her:

"Well, madame, you can be quite easy about him. I have just received a letter from him, which I have brought with me. As you will see it is dated a week later than the day of the alleged accident. The report therefore is false."

I handed the precious letter to the two women.

There was in their respective attitudes a difference such that it would have been impossible not to notice it. Mme. B———, expansive by nature, at once manifested her joy.

"Ah! the brave fellow!" she exclaimed glancing at the sheet which she held out to her companion. "How glad I am! He will never know what days of worry he has caused us."

Mme. Herdevin, was bending over the paper, which she had laid upon her muff. She did not utter a word. I was standing in front of her.

I saw only the almost imperceptible movement of her lowered eyelids, but I fancied I heard her sigh several times, a prey to an emotion which she tried hard to contain.

"May we read it?" queried Mme. B———.

I nodded affirmatively, and turning to Mme. Herdevin she asked:

"Are you reading it?"

Mme. Herdevin did not raise her eyes, nor did she answer immediately; but in a few seconds she stammered:

"I am trying to . . . . since we have permission . . . . . It is very difficult . . . . . This handwriting is frightful!"

"That is true," said Mme. B———. "One would think a fly had been crawling over the paper."

Then turning to me she added:

"Suppose you read it to us; you are used to deciphering bad scribbling."

"Very willingly," said I.

Mme. Herdevin's hand trembled slightly as she handed back the letter, which I began to read aloud. I had to stop occasionally to make out the small, indistinct writing with which I was not familiar. It was a very detailed account of a week passed at St. Louis, Senegal, which seemed to be the natural sequence of previous narratives, and to take up its author's life at a point where he had left off. The thread of it was interrupted at frequent intervals by notes,

observations and reflections, so that the letter filled eight or ten pages. It was the letter of an indolent man, written slowly, in his hours of idleness, to kill time. Mme. B———, with her habitual vivacity of mind interrupted me from time to time, with such remarks, for instance, as:

"Do you know that it is longer drawn out than his books? He hasn't spared you the smallest detail."

Or:

"What talent! One can see all that he describes: one is positively in Senegal itself. All said and done, it's a nasty place: I prefer Paris."

Mme. Herdevin remained silent; but when, having finished reading, I glanced at her I thought that another woman was before me. The care, anguish and pain with which her face had been drawn had vanished as by magic. She was beaming with a secret joy that was more difficult to dissemble than sorrow, and her beautiful eyes were tender and moist.

"I was rather surprised at this nice letter," I remarked. "I never would have believed that Kermoysan would honor me with such friendship."

"One must never be surprised at anything he does," said Mme. B———. "And for that matter, you needn't be too proud. He's fond of writing."

Then addressing Mme. Herdevin she asked:

"Haven't you had a letter from him yet?"

This unexpected question embarrassed Mme. Herdevin.

"Why," she said, becoming pale, "I do not expect one. We are not intimate enough for him to write to me."

"Oh! I'm sure he likes you very much," Mme. B——— assured her. "You needn't be afraid; your turn will come!"

"He writes very often. Was he such a faithful correspondent during his previous voyages?" I asked.

"He was not," replied Mme. B———. "He left us practically without news. Just a word or two now and then: 'I am here, I am in good health, I am bored!' That was all. You see, he was too youug. The taste for letter paper only comes to those who are getting old. I wager you will not find time to reply to him."

"Indeed I shall, Madame," and at length, I answered.

"Be sure you tell how alarmed about him we were."

At this moment a cloud came over Mme. Herdevin's brow again.

"Can we be quite satisfied that he is safe?" she queried timidly.

We looked at her in astonishment, and she explained, seeking her words carefully:

"This letter, it is true, shows that at the date of the dispatch no accident had yet occurred,

But may it not have happened later? Perhaps the mistake was only in the date."

I endeavored to reassure her, and Mme. B——— came to my support.

"What a wild idea!" cried my old friend. "Doubt is no longer possible. The report was false, that is evident. Kermoysan is as well as ever he was, is not forgetting any of his friends and will return to us one of these fine mornings, a little weather beaten, a little worn, but always the same. That is as clear as daylight."

Mme. Herdevin did not insist, but I saw that she had become anxious again, with that unreasonable anxiety which finds ground for being even in things which are against evidence; an anxiety peculiar to those who love, and which the presence and voice of the loved one can alone dispel.

These incidents drew my attention again to the probable mystery of Kermoysan's life.

"Evidently," I argued, "he writes so many and such lengthy letters in the hope that news of him will reach a person to whom, for some reason or other, he cannot write directly."

And the attitude of Mme. Herdevin, the fact that she alone of all his intimate friends had not, or would not admit that she had, received a letter from him, the nature of her emotion and her efforts to conceal it, and her anxiety, so much deeper, so much keener than ours,—all these signs, taken together, gave definite shape

to my suspicions. She loved him; that I no longer doubted. Was she loved in return? Was it she of whom Kermoysan was ceaselessly thinking? That I could not tell.

However, I thought I did well in writing of her at length in my reply to Kermoysan. I recounted the little I knew about her recent financial embarrassments; I gave a few details about her home and little Martha; I dwelt upon the anxiety she had manifested when the false news of the loss of the *Triton* was announced, and of the deep interest she had taken in his reassuring letter; I even ventured to urge my friend to write to her, and endeavored to insinuate with all possible delicacy that his reserve towards her when he was so prodigal of his letters to other people might come to be regarded as singular by some people. It was advice almost that I gave to him in very covered phrases. I never knew whether he saw through my oratorical precautions and if he did whether he followed the advice. However this may be, Mme. Herdevin never spoke of having received a letter from him.

CHAPTER XI.

KERMOYSAN'S absence was prolonged more than he had himself anticipated. As long as it lasted he did not cease to correspond actively with his friends, so that he did not leave us, so to speak. We felt that he was with us continuously. By following him we at last familiarized ourselves with the exotic landscapes that enframed him in our memory. We could see the mangrove roots running into the sluggish waters of the river, the alligators dozing in the mud, the fauna, the flora, the incandescent skies of that equatorial Africa which weighed upon him with its whole heat and immensity. Further on we suffered from his ennui, from a homesickness that we felt was more cruel than he avowed, from his longing to feel cold, to see snow, for the trees, flowers and shade of our dear latitudes.

For my part I received several letters from him, and I remember I wrote him that they cured me of any desire I might have had to make long voyages. Never did I feel more strongly that one must remain in the corner of the world where one is born. Yes, we are surrounded with an ensemble of things which become a little of ourselves, and away from which

a part of our soul suffers and yearns. The hot light, the gigantic trees, the enormous animals, in brief, all the attractions which the tropics offer to our curiosity are not worth the cloudy skies in which our fancy vaults, the restful shade of our beeches and elms, the perfumed roses of our little gardens, and the domestic cats that purr upon our knees.

Mme. B——— would say with a kindly smile: "Never let us travel."

And I shared her sentiments.

Was it the effect of his letters, which had made it seem as though he had always been with us? However this may be, his return was almost unnoticed, so little fuss did it occasion. One fine day, when he was to be met again wherever he had been accustomed to go before his departure, it was as though he had never left Paris. Yet a year of absence and fatigue had aged him somewhat. His face, bronzed by the sun of Senegal, was thinner; his beard and hair were whiter, thus accentuating the contrast they formed to his features which remained obstinately youthful; moreover his movements were those of a tired man, and there was a certain morbidness of gesture and manner that he had not possessed before.

"M. Kermoysan has aged very much," people said.

This was not strictly true, but it expressed in

a simple phrase the impression he caused to all his friends on seeing him again.

He had to give an account of his travels; that goes without saying. He did so with perfect good grace, without any indication of displeasure, without apparent lassitude, but without much enthusiasm. When he was led to talk upon the subject he spoke in an almost low voice, without accentuating anything, yet with such art that each of his words had a sense of its own and a thousand coloring details seemed to issue therefrom. He was listened to with such interest that one day Mme. B———, delighted at some very picturesque anecdote and suddenly forgetful of her sedentary tastes, exclaimed:

"Gracious! how happy you must be to live such a life, so grand, so full of variety!"

He responded coldly:

"Very happy, in effect."

And I noticed, or thought I noticed, that at this very moment Mme. Herdevin was following him with a scrutinizing gaze.

After his return Kermoysan was more cordial towards me.

"Your letters afforded me much pleasure," he had said, as he shook my hand. "You can have no idea how glad one is to get news of one's friends when one is separated from them by half the earth."

In the most friendly manner he inquired what I had been doing during his absence, asked

about my work, my plans, my new tastes, and my literary opinions almost in the manner of an elder brother. He also begged me to visit him often.

This I did not fail to do. We lunched several times together, sometimes at a restaurant, sometimes in his apartments where honest Adolphe, happy to be in his service again, cooked admirably for him. Adolphe's culinary efforts, however, were lost upon Kermoysan.

"Monsieur is no gourmand," said the old servant to me, in a burst of confidence. "To-day I am going to serve endive. You will see that he will take it for mere lettuce. When I give him a partridge he never fails to say: 'Adolphe, this chicken is delicious!'"

This is precisely what did happen. Occasionally, when his mistake was too bad, he would feel constrained to excuse himself and would say:

"I cannot help it, my poor Adolphe, the kouskous * has spoiled my palate."

While becoming more frequent, and even more friendly, my relations with Kermoysan did not become much more intimate. We conversed on general subjects, sometimes about me, never about himself. He remained as enigmatical to me as at the time when I only saw him at a distance, save for the suspicions that had entered my mind during his absence. But these

* An African stew, highly spiced and peppered.

suspicions, after all, had only been extremely vague, and now the naturalness and simplicity of his manners eradicated them almost completely. A new incident was to rearouse them.

"Have you heard the news?" asked Mme. B—— one day.

"What news?"

"Oh! big news about your friend Kermoysan."

I replied, thoughtlessly:

"Is he going to get married?"

My old friend burst into a laugh.

"Always perspicacious!" she exclaimed. "No, he is leaving the Navy."

She added:

"At least, so well-informed persons say. But you must know all about it, you who no longer leave him."

Kermoysan had as yet said nothing to me about his decision. Two or three days later, however, he confirmed the news, with an air of indifference, as though it were a matter of slight importance.

"You who were so fond of your profession, of voyages, and foreign lands!" I remarked.

He paced to and fro in his study, amid the rich stuffs, the bizarre arms, and sumptuous bibelots that reminded him of the distant countries he would see no more.

"Yes," he said, "I was fond of them, very

. . . . . But, what will you ? One becomes sedentary, gets old."

"Not you."

"I, like everybody else—quicker perhaps. You can see my hair is quite white. Anyhow, the matter is decided. I have written to the ministry. I am no longer an officer, no longer a sailor."

"I trust you will not regret it!" I remarked imprudently.

I can see him now as he stopped in front of me, his hands thrust in the pockets of his smoking jacket, with a thoughtful look in his eyes, as though it were fixed upon something far away, a something that I could not divine.

"No," he said shaking his head, "I shall not regret it. In the first place one must never regret what one has done: it serves no purpose and is a waste of time. And then—then——"

He was weighing his words or hesitated to speak. All at once he made up his mind, in an irresistible need of expansion, speaking with a volubility that was new to me, with free gesticulation and in vibrating voice:

"Well, what will you? These marching orders, these departures, they break one's life up brutally. One is quiet and comfortable, and well content to remain so: off to Africa! off to Tonkin! . . . . . And it has to be gone through over and over again . . . . . Yellow men, black men, a procession of ugly monkeys that make

you doubt your humanity . . . . . God only knows where they would have sent me soon, to what seas, among what savages! . . . . . I have seen too much: I am weary of it, I assure you. (He appeared to be trying to convince himself that this was so.) I need a little stability . . . . Yes, stability . . . . Go all round the world only to start again when one has finished the journey, no, no. Such a thing is no longer in season . . . . . What do I propose to do? Why, stop in Paris, like everybody else; there is nothing very frightful in that . . . . . I shall write—turn out some books. . . . . I shall not find time hang heavily upon my hands, you may be sure. Indeed, no! In the first place I am never bored: ennui, that is only for imbeciles."

He paused, and concluded with a sharp gesture:

"Besides, it is done. Therefore, let us say no more about it."

He was suffering visibly. He was not so sure that he was right as he professed to be. This rupture with his career was a tearing away also, a departure, a farewell, as it were. And seeing him so agitated I could not help thinking that the decision did not emanate from himself, but that he must be obeying his solicitude for some dear one, whom he wished at whatever cost to spare tears and anguish. Who knows but what the false report of the loss of the *Triton* was the cause that impelled him to his decision? Then

I admired him. What mattered it whether he was right or wrong? What mattered his career, his future, his taste for travel thus sacrificed? He at least knew how to love: this was the essential thing.

CHAPTER XII.

The advent of summer dispersed us. Mme. B——— had invited me to visit her at her estate in Touraine, and I passed some charming days there in the beautiful country beneath a propitious sky. She had also counted upon Kermoysan. He did not keep his word, and excused himself in a note which in no way resembled his long letters from Senegal.

"He remembers his friends when he is far away from them," she said, with a shade of melancholy; "when he is near to them, he forgets them."

We learned from others that he was wandering from resort to resort, alone, most unsociably. A letter from Mme. Herdevin, who was in the Pyrenees for the benefit of little Martha's health, apprised us that he had spent a few days at Bagnères-de-Luchon, whence he had visited her, and that he had gone to Biarritz for a longer stay. He did not carry out his plan, for a few days afterwards he was seen at Aix-les-Bains. A little later I met him myself in the usual crush at the railway station of Saint Germain-des-Fossés. At first, I think, he was not particularly pleased to see a face he knew; but this impression soon disappeared to give place to a very different one,

and he began to talk freely, like a man who had not heard the sound of his own voice nor that of a friendly voice for some time.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

"To Royat, where I have some friends."

"Are they expecting you?"

"I did not say when I should arrive."

"Well, then, come and lunch with me at Vichy, will you? It will only delay you half a day."

I accepted, and he seemed pleased. In the train, while looking at the monotonous landscape, the long horizons with their lines of poplars, the slowly flowing, half dried rivers, and the clumps of trees scattered about the fields he explained that he was being treated for his stomach, from which he had been suffering for some time.

"I am passing a most lamentable summer," he said. "I am bored to death. I am tired of hotels and sick of casinos, yet I drag myself about with no other object than to shift from place to place, like an invalid who turns about in his bed."

I did not know how to answer him. I entered into his views. I agreed that railways, hotels and casinos were nefarious inventions, and ended by asking whether in the midst of his wanderings he did not find some distraction in work.

"But I am not working," he cried with a gesture of discouragement. "I am doing abso-

lutely nothing. Impossible to write a line. Besides, I haven't an idea, not one. I am completely unoccupied. I have dropped all correspondence; I do not even look at a newspaper."

He said this in a gloomy voice, and with nervous gestures.

"Why," I suggested, "do you not go to Mme. B———'s, instead of wandering in this way from place to place? She would be delighted to have you. She does not expect many visitors now. You would be nice and quiet there, well looked after, and would be able to settle down to work again in one of the prettiest places anybody could wish for."

He appeared to hesitate a moment.

"No," he said, replying to his own thoughts rather than to my proposition. "No, decidedly, I am not in the humor for company. I need to feel myself wholly independent. There are times when one is better alone, or among strangers. I am in one of those moods now. I hope my friends will excuse me."

On arriving at Vichy I accompanied him to the two sources of which he was taking the waters at half-hour intervals. We passed the half-hour meandering mechanically around the band stand, amid the indolent and insipid crowd which was being bored to the music of a popular operetta, the favorite airs of which the violins were sawing for the thirtieth time.

"You cannot imagine," remarked Kermoysan,

" to what a degree that music annoys me. And still I come to listen to it twice a day, because I have to be somewhere. Then this coming and going wearies one a little. One thinks of nothing, but the fifteen hours between the rising and setting of the sun pass all the same."

As soon as he had swallowed his second glass of water we were seated at a table in the international club. He ate sparingly, and made remarks that varied little and betrayed a state of mind that was singularly highstrung, almost alarming. Never had he shown himself so unrestrained. He evidently thought he was safe from all investigation in this place filled with unknown faces, where he was alone. He probably said to himself:

" What does it matter if they do notice my trouble ? They cannot guess the cause of it !"

He spoke to relieve himself. He complained of a thousand insignificant annoyances, for the sheer pleasure of complaining, like a man whose very sources of life are attacked, and who, saying nothing about the malady itself deplores only its faintest symptoms. Never did a conversation cause me a more painful impression; at times I fancied that his reason, beaten by too many storms too long withstood, was giving way.

As the time for leaving him drew near I asked him what his plans for the end of the season were. He shrugged his shoulders.

" I have not got any," he said, " I have not

got any. What the deuce do you think I can make plans about? When I have finished my cure, if I do finish it, I shall go a-wandering again, as I have done hitherto. It seems to me that this summer will never end!"

At the station, to which he accompanied me, he made this last recommendation:

"If you meet any of our friends don't tell them that I am here!"

In the crowded compartment of the train which bore me away I had great difficulty in shaking off the impression which his trouble, his agitation, and his strange remarks had caused me. I kept repeating to myself this phrase which I could not get out of my head:

"Man overboard! Man overboard!"

And I pitied him with all my useless sympathy.

CHAPTER XIII.

That year I did not return to Paris till towards the end of November. My first visit was to Mme. B———'s where I was sure of hearing all the news about our mutual friends. She informed me that Kermoysan had been back in town for several weeks; then as I inquired after Mme. Herdevin she became sad.

"The poor woman," she said, "is threatened with a new sorrow, the worst of all. Her little Martha is worse. It is feared that the end is near—and you know how she loves her!"

On leaving Mme. B———'s I happened to run across Herdevin, and stopped him to ask after his child.

"Still in the same condition," he replied with indifferent shortness, as though not aware how serious that condition was.

On Mme. Herdevin's day I called at the house, but she was not receiving: Martha's condition was extremely critical. The next day I returned to make inquiries, and learned that the child had died during the night.

A sort of instinct impelled me to call on Kermoysan, whom I had not seen for a day or two, not having found him in. I was moved with

that emotion at once egotistical and compassionate which is easily aroused at contact with death, even when we are not particularly interested in those whom it strikes under our eyes. Therefore, before touching upon any current question I told him the news I had just learned.

"I heard about it this morning," he said. "I——"

He paused; then seeing that I was waiting for him to continue, went on with effort, evidently not saying what he first intended to:

"She was a delicious child, notwithstanding her infirmities. These little suffering things, you know, sometimes have a tenderness and grace that touch us the more because we feel they are so fragile!"

I knew that Mme. Herdevin allowed few persons to approach her child, and Kermoysan's words therefore surprised me.

"Did you then see her often?" I asked.

"Occasionally," he explained. "She suddenly took a liking to me one day when I arrived before the usual hour and they kept her awhile in the drawing-room. She wanted to see me again. She used to call me the young gentleman with the white hair! I was greatly touched by her sympathy, I assure you. Poor little tot. I shall miss her."

He paused again. I, ill at ease, and feeling an inexpressible sadness in the air, also remained

silent. Presently he continued in a deep voice: "What a loss it must be to her poor mother. She loved her so passionately."

I glanced at him, and was not mistaken: a furtive tear was glistening in his eye. Strong men sometimes have these weaknesses: they can resist suffering better than pity.

A few days later I saw Mme. Herdevin. She had now comprised me in the very small number of intimate friends she received, whom I fancy she had chosen among those she deemed capable of really sympathising with her grief. It was a sad moment, for the sight of a deep sorrow evokes the tristful echoes that the daily course of life suppresses within us, the sentiment of all that menaces us, the intuition or the terror of sufferings that are lying in wait for us. I had never seen a more sincere, more mortally painful expression of grief. In these few days she had grown years older. Wrinkles had suddenly furrowed her fine brow whose purity no sorrow had previously been able to mar; her complexion had become clouded with a deep, unhealthy tone; her crystalline voice, that had been so full of charm, had become broken. She was another woman altogether. And yet this tragically sorrowful mask was not unfamiliar to me. I had seen it before, in other circumstances. When? I tried to remember, and all at once I recalled that it was a few months before, at the time of the false rumor

of Kermoysan's death. Only then she controlled herself, whereas now, there being no reason why she should hide her grief as a mother, she gave free vent to it, imploring with her eyes a sympathy that she knew she would everywhere receive. She was stricken to the heart, but it was with a wound that she could show, that would not be envenomed by calumny.

This sudden discovery, corroborating at such a moment so many other signs previously observed, troubled me to such a degree that I could hardly stammer the few conventional phrases I had come to deliver myself of. How feebly they expressed my compassion! How they rendered in insignificant words a sentiment so strong that it was choking me! I yearned to tell her that I had solved all the mystery of her soul; that I understood her two loves, to one of which it was not permitted to console the other that was bleeding; that I pitied her, pitied her to the point of feeling the very strings of my heart vibrate with sympathy, pitied her so that I suffered with her that exquisite pain she could not avow. Instead of this I had perforce to content myself with the utterance of those immutable words which are employed on all such occasions, like the palls that serve at all funerals. Yet she must have felt how sincerely I shared her sorrow, for she talked to me at considerable length about the little one that had been taken from her, told

me how courageous the child had been through all her suffering, and about her winning ways and touching words, in a weak, colorless voice that seemed to pass through sobs.

"Poor, poor darling!" she said. "I was not able to shield her from a single attack of pain, nor could I give her any of the pleasure that other children enjoy who can walk, and run, and play. How she ought to have been loved to compensate her! I am afraid I did not love her enough, not enough. I had other cares, other thoughts. When she used to ask, 'Mother, what are you thinking about?' I could not always answer, 'Of you, darling!' But she would hold out her arms to me all the same, her poor, thin little arms that I shall never see again, and throwing them round my neck would say: 'Mamma, I am quite sure that you love me more than anything.' Oh! yes, I loved her more than all else; oh! yes, I know it now!"

It did her good to talk like that, and I let her go on, finding no words with which to interrupt her. In this way my visit lasted longer than I thought it would. When I rose to take leave of her, Kermoysan entered, and there came into Mme. Herdevin's eyes a gleam of relief, like a half extinct spark of life lighting up again for an instant. They shook hands without a word. I understood that this silence was eloquent; I understood that it contained all suffering and all

consolation, an infinitude of sorrow in which mingled an infinitude of love; I understood that it hid one of those mysteries which the human eye can never fathom, for alas! who can measure tenderness and kindness that fault obscures?

CHAPTER XIV.

Life goes on, bearing away our sentiments, attenuating our impressions, tolerant to those who suffer, indifferent to spectators. For that matter, unless we are viciously inquisitive, the affairs of other people do not interest us particularly, and we pay little attention to them. Mme. Herdevin having ceased to appear in society, was soon forgotten. I called upon her from time to time, out of fidelity; but I was forced to admit now that I rarely saw her and she was always in mourning, that she was not so interesting to me. Sometimes at Mme. B——'s or elsewhere she was spoken of in friendly or frivolous terms, and regret at her retirement or commiseration for her were expressed:

"Poor woman! When will she ever recover from the blow?"

"Ah! We shall never see her again as she used to be."

And that was all.

As to Kermoysan, he had also disappeared. Seized with one of his fits of unsociability, he had shut himself up in his entresol in the Rue Oudinot.

"I am working," he said, in explanation of his seclusion.

This explanation was accepted; there was nothing extraordinary about it. Nevertheless, I could not help but remark that his disappearance practically coincided with the death of little Martha, that had deprived us of Mme. Herdevin. At first this struck me as being a fine discovery, to be added to those I had already made. Then, as I only saw the hero and heroine of my romance at long intervals I thought little more about them until they were forced upon my attention again under tragical circumstances which raised the last corner of the veil of mystery which still enveloped them.

It was in January, when the season was at its height. I was then, like everybody else, living only that empty and factitious life which each night recommences its monotonous round—dinners, soirées, calls, weariness of the same talk, the same costumes, the same menus, fatigue from staying up too long the previous night, disinclination to work.

One day the rumor circulated that Mme. Herdevin was ill. At first she was said to be suffering from a slight congestion of the lungs, then it was learned that she had become worse, and soon it was said that little hope of saving her was entertained. The very day these reports began to get alarming I encountered Kermoysan at a select little soirée to which Mme. B——— had invited, him although hardly expecting that he would turn up.

"So you have issued from your seclusion?" I said as I greeted him.

"Yes, yes," he replied, "it could not last for ever, you know."

He did not look well. His face was drawn and there was an anxious look in his eyes.

"You look tired," I observed. "You have doubtless been working too hard."

"Working too hard?" he repeated. "Yes, perhaps so. And then it isn't good to isolate one's self. One has always need of the society of others, more than one thinks—even if only to avoid one's self a little."

"Have you entirely renounced the savage state?"

"Entirely. It is absurd to play the hermit. I shall begin to go out again, as I used to do. My book will be finished all the same, if it ever is to be finished, which I am by no means sure about!"

Thereafter I met him everywhere, even when making afternoon calls; but he could not recover either his equilibrium or that absolute self-possession for which I had admired him when I first made his acquaintance. He would arrive with anxious mien, with the air of a man who is waiting or looking for something. He took little part in the conversation, to which he contributed only in a nervous or absent-minded manner, now returning a wrong answer to a question addressed to him, now coming out with a long tirade, upon

which the discussion turned without his continuing to defend his point of view.

"M. Kermoysan has become very singular," remarked Mme. B——— to me one day. "What has come over him? Do you know?"

"I think he has been working too hard."

My old friend smiled.

"Working too hard!" she said. "That is a good thing for you literary people. It stretches the nerves and hides everything!"

It always happened at our gatherings that some one brought Mme. Herdevin's name upon the tapis, for since she had been taken ill she had been remembered again, either because she furnished a subject of conversation, or out of pure kindness and sympathy. Kermoysan never spoke of her, but as soon as he heard her name mentioned he became attentive, and if he was engaged in conversation he was not able to disguise the fact that he was not listening to what was being said to him. The news however scarcely varied: the sick woman's condition became worse every day, although she fought against her malady with all the strength of her will and years. Apropos to this a medical friend of ours explained that in cases of inflammation and congestion of the lungs one ought never to despair; and that in the course of his career he had often seen sufferers from this complaint recover after they had been given up by the doctors. But he added:

"Unfortunately, in her case, the disease is attacking a temperament exhausted by great moral suffering, by her inconsolable grief at the loss of her child, and it therefore has the best possible ground to work upon."

None the less everybody was inclined to be confident as to the outcome, especially as there is always time enough to wax sad.

This lasted about a week. I frequently called at her house for news, but the information I obtained from the servants was not more explicit than that which was circulated in society. Then, one day, at dinner, somebody asked the usual question:

"Is there any news of poor Mme. Herdevin?"

A voice responded:

"She is dead."

Kermoysan was seated opposite to me. There was such a gleam in his eyes, he made a gesture of such terror and despair that I shivered to the very marrow. He controlled himself, however; the cry that rose to his lips did not burst forth, and exerting all his energy in a supreme effort, he recovered apparent composure.

The servants were serving the fish, and all round the table the news of Mme. Herdevin's death had caused an explosion of sympathy.

"She is dead! Oh, how sorry I am."

"Poor woman! So charming, so good!"

"Her life was not a very happy one, they say."

"Did she suffer much?"

These phrases, and others of a similar nature, were exchanged over the orchids that decorated the table, to the cadence of the discreet noise of the forks. The person who had brought the news was asked for details. She had not many to give. All she knew was that the death struggle had been a long one.

"Was she conscious to the last?" somebody asked.

Kermoysan who had appeared to be absent-minded, as though nothing that could be said could interest him became attentive. The person interrogated replied:

"I cannot say. I know nothing more than I have told you."

Kermoysan's neighbor leaned towards him and said:

"You knew poor Mme. Herdevin very well, did you not?"

He looked at her and replied with a little hesitation:

"Very well? No, madame: I saw her occasionally."

"I never had the pleasure of meeting her," she went on, "but I have always heard her well spoken of. She was a very charming woman, I understand."

Kermoysan was livid.

"Yes, charming, altogether charming," he stammered.

I felt the effort these banale phrases cost him, and saw that his strength was giving way. Fortunately the dialogue was interrupted. Another dish had been brought in and wine was being served, the guests being asked to choose between Pomard and Château-Laroze.

It was a lucky diversion. The conversation about Mme. Herdevin dropped, to the great satisfaction of the mistress of the house, who was beginning to fear that her dinner party would be a gloomy one. Various subjects were taken up in turn and soon the bon mots of some of wits provoked hilarity.

Kermoysan conducted himself very well. He was grave, no doubt; but his impassive face betrayed no emotion. He spoke little, it is true, but this caused no suprise, for he was known to be somewhat capricious. He managed to deliver himself of a few phrases about something or other, however, and thus was almost as attentive to his neighbor as politeness demanded. I was, I think, the only person who noticed that he did not eat. He made two or three attempts but the effort was too great, he could not do it. On the other hand he emptied his glasses as quickly as the servants filled them.

In the smoking room I went up to him intending on no matter what pretext, to say something affectionate to him, but I could not find the words I wanted to say. Besides, he looked at me almost supplicatingly, with a look that

seemed to say: "Don't speak to me about it, don't, I entreat you." I therefore merely handed to him the pink candle with which I had just lighted my cigar. He lit his with it and began to smoke mechanically, with rapid puffs. In spite of his silence I remained by him to defend him from the conversation of the others, who were very gay.

We returned to the drawing-room. There was a reception there, and new guests were arriving. Kermoysan had to shake hands with some of them. At one moment he was buttonholed by a stout lady who gesticulated with her fan. Then he retreated into a corner. The room became more crowded, and I saw that he was preparing to slip away. Without more reflection I decided to follow him.

Being so early in the evening it did not enter his mind that anybody would leave at the same time. He called for his overcoat, got into it rapidly and went out without noticing that I was following. We were in the Rue Jean Goujon. He passed behind the line of carriages at the edge of the pavement and went off rapidly in the direction of the quays. From the distance at which I kept behind him I could see him gesticulating in the night. Sometimes he would stop, like a man pursued by a tenacious thought that little by little bore him out of the external world and made him forget it. Then he would go on again zigzagging from one pavement to the

other with the manner of a drunken man. Who has not met such odd passers-by in the street, smiled at their manner and followed them with curious eye? Sometimes Kermoysan stood still, I think for several minutes. I was compelled to stop, too, and having time to reflect, felt a little ashamed of the sort of spying I was engaged in. To conciliate my conscience I argued that it was my duty to follow him in this way to protect him, or to save him from himself if, as I feared, he took some extreme course.

The streets, through which the winter wind swept icily, were almost deserted. It was only at long intervals that we met anybody, and they, their faces buried in their coat collars and blowing upon their fingers, took no notice of us.

On reaching the Seine Kermoysan leaned his elbow on the parapet and bent over. Then I was indeed filled with anxiety. Evidently he was thinking of death. Death was beckoning to him, the dark waters were singing to him with the alluring voices of sirens. He was dreaming of the delight of being delivered from the grief which was racking his heart, of being borne by the waves yonder into the unknown, into the mysterious regions where *She* was wandering—waiting for him, perhaps! What was there to hold him back, what could prevent him from plunging into that oblivion from which a little gray wall alone separated him? I waited, hidden behind a tree, ready to rush to the rescue,

impelled by the force of social prejudice, although a secret voice whispered: "Let him alone; if he wants to die he is free to do so." And I did not feel the cold, the bitter wintry wind that soughed through the bare branches of the trees and made the reflections of the lamps on the quays dance on the bosom of the tide.

Suddenly Kermoysan drew himself up, and a thrill passed through me.

"Now is the time," I thought, as I moved from behind the tree.

I was mistaken, however, for he walked away from the parapet. Mechanically he pulled his hat over his eyes and continued on his way towards the Pont de l'Alma. He walked now with steady step and without stopping, having an end in view. I guessed that he wanted to see the house where she was lying.

It was a mansion of ornamental architecture separated from the Avenue du Trocadéro, on which it faced, by a large wrought iron gate surmounted by a gilded number. Kermoysan stopped in the middle of the avenue opposite the gate. He leaned against a tree and fixed his eyes on the closed shutters of the silent apartment. Snow had begun to fall, a heavy snow whose big flakes streaking the obscurity of the night whitened him little by little; but he did not feel them or attempt to shake them off. It was another form of death that presented itself,

still more attractive, the kindly pall prepared by nature, the velvet carpet, fallen piece by piece from the sky inviting to unconsciousness. But that was the idea of a calm-minded man, and I am sure never occurred to Kermoysan. When one really suffers death appears as deliverance, not voluptuousness.

He grew tired of standing still, however, and began to walk up and down in front of the house, sometimes with rapid strides, sometimes more slowly. Now and then he stopped, raised his eyes to a window on the second floor where a gleam of light fitered through the shutters, the room no doubt where they were keeping watch beside the body, and wrung his hands. And suddenly, I was struck with the frightful thought that he would not have the supreme consolation of seeing her again; that the terrible *never* had seized upon him in all its horror at a moment when, although it was materially possible to do so, he could not look upon her lying there amid the flowers, and kiss her rigid hands; that the last eyes to gaze upon her would not be those that had adored her, those that her lips had kissed, perhaps, those that were filled with her image, those that had not even the right to weep. And I felt a thrill of hatred towards our laws, towards our customs, which proclaim duty more sacred than love. The minutes passed slowly; the snow also fell less fast.

"Is he going to stay there all night?" I wondered.

He had obviously ceased to take count of time: he must have been conscious of nothing but his grief. At length, however, instead of turning back he walked straight on at a rapid pace. Without looking at the river he followed the quays to the Pont des Invalides, crossed it, wandered through long dark avenues in which I nearly lost sight of him, and finally reached the Rue Oudinot. He walked so quickly that I had difficulty in following him. On arriving at his door he took his key from his pocket, but instead of letting himself in, he made a gesture of despair and resumed his indefatigable walk. A new anxiety seized me. Tired as I was I could not possibly leave him. It was no longer curiosity that actuated me, for I knew all that I wanted to know; it was pure pity, the feeling that in his mental grief the poor unhappy, abandoned man had at least one sympathetic soul near him whose compassion would do him good perhaps, even if he knew nothing of it.

"Heavens! where is he going, what is he going to do?" I asked myself. "Has he returned to that idea of death that he dismissed once, but which certainly is lingering in his mind?"

This time the streets were utterly deserted, and there were no lights in any of the houses. I felt very much alone with this desperate man

who, the snow deadening his footsteps, glided like a phantom through the darkness and silence.

He did not go far.

At the corner of the Rue Vaneau an uninviting wine shop was open, although there was not a single customer in front of the zinc counter. Kermoysan entered. An instant afterwards, on passing by the dirty windows, I saw that he was seated at a little round table with a decanter of liquor before him. I passed by a second time. He was no longer drinking, but his face was buried in his hands and he was sobbing. It was strange and striking, I assure you, this grief which had come to break down in this hole, where nothing about it would ever be known.

I watched him for a while through the window. The wine shop keeper behind his counter also looked at him, stupefied; then tip-toed to the end of the shop and disappeared through a door, leaving him alone. The man's delicacy touched me. I concluded that Kermoysan's sobs marked the end of the acute crisis, and went away.

A thousand confused thoughts agitated my mind; a thousand questions presented themselves that my imagination could alone answer. On reaching home I builded a whole romance. But I realized how fragile it was. One thing alone was certain. Kermoysan was keeping his secret to the end, beyond the tomb. What there was between them none would ever know. It

was now the past, which no longer existed save in one memory with which it would finally be extinguished, of which I had caught a few sparks, that are extinct to-day, and the cinders of which I had no right to stir.

CHAPTER XV.

The next day a vague uneasiness prompted me to call at Kermoysan's house to inquire after him. I did not expect he would receive me, and was therefore not surprised when his man replied:

"Monsieur has gone out."

But honest Adolphe did not know how to lie to those he knew: he was so embarrassed that no doubt could be left in my mind, and I went away reassured. After the effort of the previous day, which he would have to make again, it was only natural that Kermoysan should shut himself up with his grief. And I could imagine the grim hours the unhappy man was passing with his regrets, his heart rent by one of those sorrows that no consoling thought can lull, that no friend can share. I could see him pacing his study with that movement of a chained wild beast one makes instinctively when suffering, wanting to go out and seek the intoxication of walking and of the streets, but afraid to, lest his secret should be read in his face—a wounded and hunted animal which, not being able to drag itself to the stream, crawls into its den to lick its wounds.

In the evening, however, I met him in society, impassible, correct, irreproachable. In a calm

voice he expressed his regret at not being home in the morning when I had called, only showing a little too much insistence in explaining where he had gone. He conversed with several other persons on different subjects, and defended with animation M. Alexandre Dumas's latest piece, *Francillon*, which was being criticised. As on the previous day someone spoke to him about Mme. Herdevin, and asked him once more:

"You knew her very well, I believe?"

"Very well? No," he immediately replied. "I saw her occasionally with great pleasure."

He spoke without a twitch in his face or a quiver in his voice.

"Those who knew her," he added, "all regretted that she did not receive more frequently; therefore, although she rarely went out, she will be greatly missed."

Then with perfect ease he changed the conversation.

It was at the time when Rollinat recited his verses in every drawing room. That night he was in particularly lugubrious mood, for he recited the most mournful poems in his repertory. First of all it was "Tears:"

When wrecked by sad inquietude,
We trace griet's pathways, lone and sear,
Or seek the depths of solitude
Yet find not one ecstatic tear—

We envy mothers all their woe,
Which has the power to weep alway,
Whose bitter tears in torrents flow,
And death alone has power to stay.

Then came a sonnet entitled "The Silence of the Dead," for which the gloomy face of the poet became sombre and tragical:

We scan their portraits, hoping still to hear
One cry to break the silence of the grave.

Finally, the audience having been sufficiently prepared, his voice became cavernous, his eyes rolled with terror, and he recited "Putrefaction:"

What passes in this frame of clay,
Which the earth's sweat and ooze shall lave?
What passes in it—who shall say—
After a half year in the grave?

Men assumed the air of free thinkers; the women made grimaces of disgust. Kermoysan, with half-closed eyes, seemed to listen with profound attention. But as I passed him at the conclusion of the recitation, he said with a shudder:

"It is horrible!"

Then, checking himself, at once added:

"What bad poetry!"

He did not leave until a late hour.

His attitude had been so natural, so perfect,

that for a moment I asked myself whether I had not dreamed about the incidents of the previous evening. Then I understood that he was guarding his secret with that excessive precaution which delicate consciences adopt that are fearful to the point of seeing the eyes of judges everywhere around them, with a fear that paralyzes them even in their most insignificant acts. Poor man! He did not even dare to shut himself up in his solitude lest his isolation at that particular time should be remarked; and although his heart bled he exhibited himself with dry eyes and serene brow so that none might be prompted to ask:

"What has become of Kermoysan? Why is he not here?"

Naturally I attended Mme. Herdevin's funeral. The service was held at the Madeleine with great pomp, as befitted a wealthy person who was bound to keep up appearances to the very threshold of eternity. There were a great many people there, as is always the case at these ceremonies when there is any show about them—relatives, friends, the indifferent, the curious, all with the mournful mien suitable to the occasion and copied from that of the mutes. This crowd assumed an indescribable, uniform tint: faces resembled each other as much as the costumes did, so that I had some difficulty in discovering Kermoysan. I perceived him at last, standing a little to one side, and half hidden by a pillar

against which he was leaning in an attitude similar to that in which I had seen him two days before, in the snow in the Avenue du Trocadéro. All through the service he did not move, indifferent to the prayers that the assembly listened to on their knees, his eyes gazing into space, his soul elsewhere. Yet beside the coffin, which he could not approach except for an instant at the conclusion of the ceremony, to which his sole farewell would be the sprinkling of a little holy water, beside this coffin in which slept the beautiful one he had not been able to see again, stood the fat Herdevin, with an air of importance, very red, blowing hard, holding in his hand a handkerchief that he never thought of using, probably more bored than afflicted, and—who knows ?—well satisfied, perhaps, at an accident that had given him his coveted liberty.

Again was I assailed with the subversive ideas that had haunted me for two days. Really, how could anyone at an age when one is still susceptible of romantic exaltation witness such a spectacle without cursing the hypocrisy of our institutions, the eternal deceit with which they are enveloped, the obstacles which they have placed in the way of freedom of hearts to the profit of egoism and dryness of soul ? Later in life one reasons otherwise; in those days such were my feelings. It was for this reason perhaps that the events I observed impressed me so strongly.

When we filed past the bier I preceded Kermoysan. It was I therefore who handed him the aspergium. When he took it from my hand I for the second time remarked that look of despair in his eyes that escaped him like a cry, and which alone betrayed him. He suppressed it as one suppresses a sob. But I heard it, so to speak, resounding among the arches and filling them. Then the organs pealed, drowning the mute, lost cry in their deep harmonies. The undertaker's men lowered the pall again and bore out the flower-covered coffin with heavy tread that sounded on the flagstones, while the cortège formed and fell in behind them.

I stayed beside Kermoysan. He left the church without exerting any will of his own, borne out with the crowd, and stopped on one of the steps, his eye fixed on the beplumed hearse which soon started, causing the cabs to slacken speed, wresting a salute from the passer-by, and then was lost to sight in the calmness of the boulevards, among the omnibuses.

Kermoysan at last noticed that I was standing beside him. He looked at me, moved his lips although no sound came through them, but managed at last to exclaim in a raucous voice:

"A funeral is always a sad business."

I responded with a vague gesture and went away to spare him a fresh effort. He walked

a few steps in the direction the cortège had gone, then stopped, turned back, and started off in the opposite direction, so quickly that he seemed to be fleeing, fleeing from an enemy invisible to others, by whom he felt that he was being pursued.

CHAPTER XVI.

The following days I scarcely went anywhere without encountering Kermoysan. One would have thought he was applying himself conscientiously to catching up with visits long in arrears, or that a sort of society fever was driving him from drawing-room to drawing-room. At all events never did a man of leisure perform his social duties with more exactitude. It even seemed to me that he passed all bounds, that in seeking so strenuously to avert suspicion he risked provoking it. However, it would have excited nothing but exceedingly vague suspicions. Think what an effort of reasoning it would have necessitated on the part of persons whose attention thereto had not been previously attracted, to have connected Kermoysan's visiting with the death of Mme. Herdevin! Society people, when they give themselves the trouble, know how to observe; but their discernment does not attain to the point of divination. His manner struck some of his acquaintances; the change in his habits occasioned some surprise; his more frequent distractions, his sudden lapses into melancholy, the wrinkles with which an ever-present thought lined his forehead and furrowed the corners of his mouth, and which

gradually changed the formerly serene expression of his visage into one of worry, were remarked. That was all. I participated in several conversations of which he was the subject: not once did any of the opinions about him come anywhere near being correct.

"Haven't you noticed," said somebody, "that Kermoysan isn't what he used to be? He has aged considerably of late; he is becoming wrinkled and absent-minded. What can be the matter with him?"

A voice replied:

"They say he has been working very hard."

"But," objected another, "he doesn't publish anything now."

If there happened to be any spiteful person in the company one would hear:

"That is perhaps what is worrying him. He feels that he is used up, and the knowledge weighs upon his mind. Nothing sours a man so much as the disappointments of a literary life."

It goes without saying that more than once it was insinuated that there was a woman in the case. But nobody knew anything about it, and none suspected that that woman was dead, and that he was mourning for her. I experienced, I must confess, a certain satisfaction, not unmixed with pride, at the fact that I knew more than everybody else; I rejoiced, too, to see that his heroism was not in vain, and that he managed to preserve his secret.

This state of things lasted two or three weeks. The remembrance of Mme. Herdevin was being effaced more and more every day. Already society had ceased to talk about her, and when by chance her name cropped up in the course of conversation it seemed to belong to the long ago. Even those who had appreciated her grace and charm and beauty had forgotten her: these qualities pertained to the past, to things dead which by right were claimed by oblivion. The cynical unscrupulousness with which Herdevin showed his mistress in public places, however, could not fail to be remarked. But Herdevin had never frequented the same set as his wife, which therefore did not occupy itself much with him. It was merely observed that he would wed "that creature" in a week or two, and nothing more about him was said.

Kermoysan, however, was going into retirement again, and was managing his transitions with a good deal of art. He began by paying fewer visits, remained only a few minutes in the salons where he still put in an appearance, declined invitations, and allowed the report to get about that he was at last going to publish a new book.

When he was questioned about this he would neither confirm nor deny it.

"You will see that he won't do anything of the kind," said the spitefully inclined. "There is too much mystery about it."

A new book! Indeed, no. It was the last thing he was thinking about. I shall never forget the only visit that I paid him at that time. I found him in his disordered study, doing nothing. A number of volumes that he had no doubt been trying to read were jumbled pell-mell on the divan, on the easy chairs, on the tables—poets, prose-writers, even pious books. The room had an indescribable air of abandonment and desolation. On approaching the large work-table encumbered with papers, uncut periodicals, and unopened letters I noticed that the ink had dried in the crystal inkstand. A gesture of surprise escaped me in spite of myself. Kermoysan, standing beside me, noticed it.

"Yes," said he, "the ink has dried up. The heat of the coke, you know. Besides, I am not working just now. Don't feel up to it. Haven't any ideas."

Affecting a careless tone he continued:

"One experiences such moments, you know yourself. They are common to me. Only this time, my lazy spell is lasting longer than usual. It's a beastly nuisance. I can't get on with my book, and it's going to be a good one."

And with a great effort he began to talk to me about the book, although his thoughts were not upon it.

"I did more work when I was a sailor," he went on. "I miss my voyages. To change

from place to place, to move about, to be stirring, there's nothing like it, believe me."

He had made me sit down, although he did not sit himself, and while talking to me he paced up and down with that manner of a caged wild animal that I knew so well, and that internal agitation that impels to movement.

When I left, Adolphe showed me out. I was almost as much struck by him as by his master, whose dispositions he always reflected a little. He was unshaven, his apron was dirty, and he was visibly letting things go their own way.

"I am afraid Monsieur is not very well just now," I remarked.

The honest fellow shook his head, rolled his eyes, and began:

"Ah! Monsieur———"

But he stopped short discreetly.

I did not return to the Rue Oudinot for fear of disturbing this grief to which solitude was so favorable. There are sorrows that cannot be consoled, save by time, and time is long to the suffering. To me, who was not suffering, it passed quickly enough. Perhaps I had forgotten Kermoysan a little. I however thought about him sometimes. I imagined that he had retired from the world, was immured, so to speak, in his *garçonnière*, separated from the world by an invisible barrier, by the insurmountable wall of his regrets, when a rumor was circulated that he was going to the Soudan.

It was true.

"But what did he want to leave the service for, if he cannot keep still?" his friends demanded.

And his inconsequent action was adversely commented upon.

A few days before his departure Kermoysan came to bid me farewell. He was greatly changed. He had grown thin, and weaker. There was an air of sadder distraction about him. The look in his eyes was farther away than ever. In all his movements and gestures was that continual and threatening uneasiness that I had noticed when I last visited him. I can see him still as he sat in my only easy chair, his mobile eyes wandering upon all the objects in the room as though he were making an inventory of them, while he moved his feet about restlessly and crossed his hands incessantly.

We were both somewhat embarrassed, having thoughts which we could not or would not express. For my part I heard other words than those he uttered in an indifferent voice. I asked him a few questions about the object and equipment of the expedition to which he had had himself attached. Queer sounding names fell from his lips—Ouargla, Chambâa, Tidikelt. One might have thought from his manner that he did not hear them. He told me briefly about some of the heroic but vain attempts made to

penetrate the unexplored regions to which he was bound.

"It is a task of wild temerity that you have undertaken," I observed.

"Wild? No," he replied. "It may be a bold one, but not more so than many others which have been successfully accomplished. Besides, why should I hesitate? I have no family, I am not bound to anyone, I am utterly alone in the world, absolutely independent. What does it matter, then, if I do leave my skin there?"

"What about your friends, and your literary career?"

He smiled.

"My friends," he said gently, "have other friends. As to literature, I fancy it will get on very well without me. I have not even thought about it. Besides, I am no longer doing anything; I am not writing any more; it does not afford enough distraction. Action, action, movement, danger—that is what I need!"

His eyes brightened:

"Danger!" he repeated. "That spells pleasure—the last that gives a little value to life. One clings to life when one is on the point of losing it. . . . And then, what will you? I need to be up and doing. . . . . If I return I shall at least have done something. If I do not return. . . . . Why should one not sleep as well beneath the sands of Africa as under our dark earth?"

He rose with these words and held out his hand. I looked him straight in the face.

"I am afraid," I said, emphasizing my words, "I am afraid you won't come back."

Embarrassed by my look he turned away his eyes.

"One cannot tell," he said carelessly. "Maybe I shall, maybe I shall not. . . . . For my part I fancy I shall return. You see my soul is rivetted to my body; it will leave it only when it cannot help itself."

Then, seeing that I was upset, he imparted an unexpected cordiality to his hand clasp. His last words, which I shall never forget, were these:

"Adieu. . . . . I wish you the best of luck through life!"

Alas! I knew that I should never see him again.

For several months no particular news of him was received; one could only follow his movements by uncertain information received at long intervals about the expedition which was pushing with him into that unknown land along the course of some vast river. Then one day it was announced that while reconnoitring alone, he had perished after a heroic defence. It certainly was not a case of suicide; and yet——

CHAPTER XVII.

Such are the facts which I recalled slowly in the course of the conversation I recounted at the outset. I had ceased to take part in it, or even to listen to it, being borne away by the current of my recollections which were being gradually resuscitated in my memory. I sought to define their uncertain contours while I gave myself up to a few vague reflections.

"Alas!" thought I, "we know nothing about others. We see them come and go, move about, suffer, love, and die, and our unpractised eye is unable to pierce the hard crust of appearances, to penetrate deeper into the regions of the soul, those in which live the real being, eternally unknown to us, impenetrable, inaccessible. Their thoughts are manifested to us by words which we think we understand, and we are never sure that we have grasped their right sense. As to their acts, ah! their acts, it is worse still; they deceive us more than their words! We judge them, we classify them, define them. We say: These are good, those are bad; these are just, those are unjust, these are admirable, those are without excuse. And our judgments are nearly always as many iniquitous errors; for they are

based upon the crude categories which our crude analysis of acts has formed.

"Acts, what do they matter? They are only signs, more uncertain than words, and we know not how to interpret them. It is acts alone that we see, yet sentiments alone count, sentiments which escape us, for they are enveloped in mystery, and are of such diversity!

"Alas! who, then, in these delicate things of the heart, who will draw the exact line between the limits of good and evil? Who will say when love, forbidden by human laws, is also forbidden by those superior laws of which we sometimes feel the divine indulgence? Who will say when the fault is expiated or even, perhaps, changed in its very essence by suffering? For, after all, the power to love above all things, of a heart expanded that breaks the chains of prejudice, of a soul that rises superior to social shackles, is this not a virtue? Is there not a heroism superior to the cold observance of rules, to the commonplace obedience to laws?

"Poor silent ones! How many are the tears of which you have kept within yourselves all the bitterness! The wounded man who lies upon the blood-stained ground and awaits death without giving utterance to useless cries is admired; you who dissemble your anguish under irreproachable masks, you who know how to come, to go, to chat, to smile while your heart is break-

ing, are you then but miserable liars to be disdained? No, no, you also are heroes."

I thought a good many other things, too. But why transcribe them here?

Although they may be but acts, acts have their eloquence. Those that I have described, if I have succeeded in describing them, should convey their meaning, and if there be a judge, plead before him the cause of two lovers who doubtless suffered more than they sinned.

PART III.

ANOTHER CONVERSATION.

CHAPTER I.

Albert Portal, the well-known painter, had invited Jacques D—— and myself to visit his studio and inspect his latest canvas, which was about to be sent to America. Jacques D—— is my oldest comrade in letters; but there exists between us a tie much stronger than that of our profession: a solid friendship, based upon esteem, common efforts, reciprocal aid rendered in the hour of trial, sympathy, and similarity of tastes. Upon subjects anent which agreement is indispensable if intimacy is to be fostered our opinions are nearly always in accord: in the affairs of life I admire his uprightness, his sound judgment, his energy, which detract in nowise from a sensibility at once ardent and gentle, a delicacy truly feminine. Those who know him only by what he has written can have no conception of what he is, for he has always devoted himself to works of erudition, somewhat dry, exact, minute, impersonal, in which he disappears as

though fearful lest the literature of imagination, for which he is so marvellously gifted, should develop within him certain virtualities, certain germs, which he suppresses because he regards them as dangerous. As to Portal, eulogy of whom as an artist would be superfluous, he is above all a society man, in great request in elegant circles, a trifle snobbish, an habitué of several clubs and an excellent sportsman. Which is to say that our relations are rather casual than otherwise.

We had paid our tribute of praise to his picture, as well as to some fine studies that he showed us, and reclining on an Oriental divan beside a decanter of sherry were smoking choice cigarettes. Little by little, our chat, which was upon art matters, changed its direction; we began to talk about various persons of prominence with whose anecdotal history Portal was thoroughly familiar, and finally allusion was made to a recent scandal—the sensational rupture of a liaison between a married man and a woman moving in the best society, which had long been known to everybody. Portal recounted to us all the details of the affair with such minuteness that one might have thought he had played some rôle in it himself. Reclining there with half closed eyes and sending spirals of smoke towards the canopy of embroidered stuffs above the divan, he seemed to be enjoying his own story and the attention with which we

listened to it. In fact he stirred up these sad things seemingly without being so much as touched by the shadow of them, in the tone in which he would have explained the ins and outs of a horse-race, or the hazards of a match. When he had nothing further to relate, he passed judgment:

"You see that, on the whole, it passed off more correctly than might have been supposed from all the noise that was made about it."

We made no reply, and he added:

"Once an intrigue has been discovered it has got to stop, has it not?"

I was weak enough to murmur:

"Of course. That is always what happens."

Jacques D—— glanced at me reproachfully and asked:

"But, after all, have these rumors that are circulating about Mme. X—— any foundation on fact? Is it true that she ——"

He paused for a moment; then went on·

"That she is seriously ill?"

"Insane, you mean insane," rectified Portal. "But, pshaw! I believe the report is exaggerated. Those best informed say that her mind is a little unbalanced, but that she will get over it all right. However this may be she has certainly taken the matter too tragically."

"And her lover?" I inquired.

"Oh!" said Portal with a significant gesture, "he won't lose his head for that, I will guarantee.

He was awfully annoyed, of course, awfully annoyed . . . . . These kind of adventures are always disagreeable. . . . . But what could he do? A woman who is unfaithful to her husband is perfectly aware of the risk she is running: she has got to see to it that she isn't found out. Now this woman from the very first has been imprudent!"

"Doubtless because she really loves," said I.

"That's where she made a mistake," declared Portal triumphantly. "One should never really fall in love, because then one doesn't know what one is doing!"

Jacques D——— who had been fidgetting at Portal's remarks could contain himself no longer.

"Do you know what especially strikes me in histories of this sort?" he cried. "Well, it is the roguishness of soul and the platitude of heart that they reveal—in the case of the man, I mean, of course. This woman has suffered; I can excuse her. But her lover is a brute."

Portal opened his eyes in astonishment.

"And why, pray?" he demanded.

My worthy friend continued, excited by his passion for moralizing:

"Let us leave out of the question the anecdote you have just recounted, dear monsieur. It is no more nor less significant than many others. Let us see what happens in nine-tenths of such cases; for these stories of adultery are all alike——"

"For the lookers on, not for the principals," observed Portal banteringly.

Jacques, ignoring the interruption, continued:

"A man and woman, separated by circumstances, by duty—by life, in a word—fall in love with each other. Admitting that they be of average virtue, they do not surrender at the first cry of their desire, they fight against it, they resist."

"More or less," again interrupted Portal.

"More or less, so be it!" repeated D———. "A little, all the same—unless falling in love is habitual to them, in which case they cease to interest me. Therefore, they resist for a time. Then they succumb, because their passion is the stronger, because none has ever loved as they love, because—in short, for many good reasons. Well and good. However strong may be their passion they find means to conciliate it with the exigencies of their life, which is regular in appearance, and to which they are loath to sacrifice it. Oh! no; they enjoy love's bliss incognito for a certain number of weeks, or months, or years——"

That insupportable Portal again interrupted him.

"Oh! years!" he exclaimed sceptically.

"The length of time it lasts has nothing to do with the matter," said Jacques with a gesture of impatience. "At first they regard themselves as victims of social order, which is unjust

and tyrannical; that is understood. They seek excuses, and find them. Then the time comes when they no longer need them. They practice lying, deceit and hypocrisy in all security. Then it is that the trouble begins. Some incident occurs—a letter mislaid, a lie found out, an imprudently arranged rendezvous. Their relations are discovered. You imagine that a drama will follow? Not at all. There are a few comedy scenes, nothing more. Explanations are in order. The deceived husband or wife demands his or her rights, makes a fuss, threatens. The courts, divorce, scandal, loom upon the horizon. But at this moment the lovers discover that marriage is sacred; that the one or the other has children whose future must not be compromised; that the ties that bind them to their respective life partners are more solid than they imagined; that the family stew is more wholesome and more indispensable, if not more succulent, food than game that is high—and they separate. Good day, good night; it's all over, say nothing more about it."

"That is true," said Portal. "That is precisely the way these affairs usually go. Besides, is it not the best dénouement they can have?"

"Well," continued Jacques, "I am simple enough to consider it utterly miserable! Yes, I imagine that when one has loved enough to forget one's duty—permit me to employ this old

out-of-date word—one ought to accept all the consequences of that forgetfulness. Furthermore, I imagine that if love has lost its early freshness and empire, one ought to sacrifice the rest to it out of pure dignity and self respect."

This time Portal could not help laughing.

"But, my dear fellow," he cried, "where do you come from? This is no longer the epoch of romanticism. And then, what morality! Come, now, what would become of society if everybody thought as you do? It would have to be shaken to its bases at the first infringement of a marriage contract."

"So much the worse for society!" replied Jacques. "Society manages to get along somehow, no matter what happens. Besides, the individual interests me much more than society does. I like to see him develop nobly, unrestrained by convention and prejudice. Either love is a crime, in which case we must not love, or it is the most beautiful thing in life, and has a right to the necessary sacrifices."

Portal raised his arms.

"Heavens! what logic!" he exclaimed, "I did not know you in this light, *mon cher!* You are a nihilist, an anarchist, a most dangerous man! For my part, I look at things more simply. I think it is a good thing to take and leave each other with facility, and I think it is most fortunate that the immense majority of our contemporaries hold the same view that I do. What

do I say, the majority? The totality, *mon cher*, the totality. I could relate ten, fifteen, twenty such histories as the one I recounted just now. It would be difficult for you to cite a single case which ended in a way after your own heart—unless, perhaps, you looked for it in the *Gazette des Tribunaux*."

Jacques D—— shook his head.

"That is so," said he, "and I regret it for the men of our time. And yet——"

He paused, reflected a moment, and then went on:

"And yet, if you like, I can relate a case which differs a little from them. Although more rare it has I think as much meaning. It will demonstrate to you, if you will take the trouble to listen to it, that the contemporary soul is still susceptible of some exaltation. Perhaps we brush up against many like it, but we don't know it, or else we forget them because they are of those that develop only in silence. It was by mere chance that this one was revealed to me. Would you like to hear it?"

"Certainly," said Portal, as he offered us some fresh cigarettes, "Go ahead."

Jacques D———then recounted what follows, as far as I have been able to reconstitute it.

PART IV.

ANOTHER STORY.

TO THE END OF THE FAULT.

CHAPTER I.

PRELUDE.

During the summer of 188—, I passed several weeks at Weimar. I was then occupying myself with Goethe, and wanted to consult certain documents that I could not have found elsewhere, and, even more, to live in the atmosphere in which the great man had lived: it seemed to me that in this way I should be able to get nearer to the secrets of his heart or those of his mind. The results of this experiment was that in a very short time I lost a good many illusions about him that I had entertained. Still, there remained one. I admired the manner in which this man, who was in every respect one of the precursors of the nineteenth century, remained in the eighteenth century as regards all that is of the conception and arrangement of life. To the end, although he had written *Werther* and read

René, he pertained to that fine epoch which knew so well how to savor existence. Few men have had a more robust inclination to be happy; thus, Weimar belonging to him, he remade, arranged, and disposed his little residence with marvelous ability, with a view to comfort, pleasure and enjoyment. It bears as its stamp, and all that one sees—the house, the park, the theatre—arouses, the idea of an easy, harmonious and sweet existence. Everything, even to that queer little River Ilm, which rolls its brown waters in the deep shade of the fine old trees, seems to sing of gaiety.

This clever arrangement, this artificial character of the little town displeased me. Too many storms have passed over the world for us to be able to taste of much of the great egotist's "Olympianism," and I was irritated that it should be exhibited everywhere in calm unconcern, as though we were still in the good old *rococo* times of Charles Augustus, the Duchess Mother, and Frau von Stein. The personages of Goethenian history, whose portraits followed me everywhere, inspired me with antipathy, as did the hero himself. I bore a grudge against them for having been too happy. I would very gladly have left them now and then to go and lounge aimlessly in the Thuringian forests, had I not been anxious to finish the work which detained me at Weimar.

I had installed myself at the Crown Prince

Hotel, at the corner of the market-place, the part of the town that was the least dull. It is an immense, patriarchal house, where one is decently lodged and the food is pretty good. But the meals, which were too long and too copious, seemed dreary in the vast dining-room ornamented with plaster busts of the founders of the empire, little busts of Goethe and Schiller, as inevitable as destiny, and a few other busts, also in plaster, of the most popular among the sovereigns of the country. There was a procession of tourists armed with their *Bædeker*, who remained a day or two, visited the places of interest in the town, and disappeared. Apart from a few insignificant sentences exchanged here and there with chance companions, I was reduced to my own society, for which I have never had any particular predilection.

After ten days of this monotonous existence, the solitude was beginning to pall upon me when I struck up an acquaintance with a young German professor, Dr. Christian Hort, whom I met constantly at the Goethe Museum. We began by an exchange of reflections before one of the innumerable portraits of Christiane. I ventured the observation that with her bright air, her fine sensuous lips, her large candid eyes, and the good humor of her fat face, Goethe's lawful wife was, in point of fact, the most sympathetic in the gallery of women he had loved. Dr. Hort was not of my way of thinking. He had a weakness

for Betty, whose roguish look and saucy air pleased him. Question of taste! However, this discussion served as a point of departure for others. As the halls of the Goethe Museum, with the non-commissioned officers guarding it, and the respectful silence that filled it were not particularly favorable to our conversations, we ended by continuing them in the park. One day as we passed, while chatting, in front of one of the compact little villas surrounded with trees that skirt it, a couple issued who at once attracted my attention. The woman, very tall and slender, was of an elegance altogether unlooked for in Weimar, and that enhanced still more the nobleness of her manner and the harmony of her movements. She wore a thick veil that prevented me from seeing her face. The man was remarkably handsome, with regular and clear-cut features, a dark complexion set off by a very black moustache, and an air of easy assurance. They went without looking at anything, haughtily indifferent to the chance scenery in which they were enframed, absorbed, both of them, by something invisible that was passing within them. I gazed after them, and my companion said:

"They are French."

"You don't say so?" I exclaimed, astonished to find French people residing in a little German villa.

"Yes," went on Dr. Hort, "they are French.

They have been here nearly two years, so I have been told."

"What are they doing here?"

"Nobody knows. They rarely go out. The woman is always veiled like she is to-day. I have met her nearly a dozen times, but I have never seen her features. Moreover they know nobody, see nobody, and speak to nobody."

"There is a mystery about them, then!"

"Nobody knows anything about them except their name, and nobody is sure that even that is authentic."

"What do they call themselves?"

"De Sourbelles."

I had to get him to repeat the name two or three times, he pronounced it so queerly.

"De Sourbelles," I murmured, "it sounds familiar to me."

I must have heard the name somewhere but I could not recall where.

"They do say that there is a drama in their past," continued Dr. Hort, "but no one knows just what it is. Some assert that they are not married; others that they came here after a great scandal. They have excited a good deal of interest in the town, but as their servants won't talk people are reduced to conjectures."

The really strong impression the unknown couple had made upon me during the glimpse I got of them excited my curiosity even more than this incomplete information about them. I

therefore returned and strolled about in the neighborhood of the villa. In vain: with its half-closed grey shutters, its brick-colored walls, the trees that hid it, the creeper that climbed to the balconies, and the silence that surrounded it, the place appeared more and more mysterious to me. As to its inmates, I saw nothing more of them: no external sign gave evidence of their existence. On two or three occasions the white-capped head of a servant appeared at a window as she quickly opened or closed the shutters. That was all. Now and then, Dr. Hort, who knew all the gossip that went on in the town told me something of their doings, but this information was not very conclusive. It was never anything more important than the fact that they had made a purchase in one of the shops or had made a trip to Eisenach or Coburg, or had been seen at the theatre in the rear of a box. The less my companion managed to find out about the mysterious strangers, the more he occupied himself about them.

"I shall soon have to go away," he said, "and I shall know nothing about these people!"

He added melancholily:

"How is it that it is easier to get information about the dead than about the living? I know Frau von Stein as well as if I saw her every day. I know the exact shade of her hair, the hours at which she was accustomed to take her meals, what she thought about everything, how she was

dressed, etc., etc. And I have never been able to get a glimpse of the tip of Mme. de Sourbelles' nose!"

"It is for that reason that it is better to write history than romance," said I.

One day, as I entered the dining room of my hotel, I was surprised to see, next to my accustomed place, the delicate profile of M. de Sourbelles. He had just finished his soup, and appeared to be contemplating with extreme attention the bust of the reigning duke that happened to be opposite to him. I spoke to him in French. He looked at me in astonishment and responded, but did not allow the conversation to keep up. Thinking that he was determined to keep to himself I did not persist, and the meal went on in silence. On rising from the table we exchanged a slight salute.

The next day, contrary to all expectation, he was there again and it was he who broke the ice. He began to talk, and he talked a good deal, like a man who for a long time had not spoken in his native tongue, who rejoiced at the sound of his own voice, and had suddenly taken a disproportionate interest in a thousand different things. I soon saw that he was intelligent, of literary tastes, of open mind and excellent education, and that he possessed original and unexpected points of view that he liked to expose. But he spoke only of things, never of himself. After a few dinners partaken of side by side, after a

few strolls together that he proposed, after two or three evenings spent in one of the concert gardens, where one can kill time without too much difficulty, thanks to the beer and cigars, while a military band plays Wagner's overtures, we had touched upon about all the subjects which cultivated persons like to discuss. I was acquainted with the political and religious opinions of my chance companion, his literary leanings, his artistic preferences, his views on the new Germany, the Emperor, the Reichstag and the socialists: but I did not know what he was doing at Weimar, nor whence he came—in short, I knew absolutely nothing about him. Not a word had he uttered that could serve as an indication, or help me to frame any supposition. But once, when I complained of the artificial aspect of Weimar, he let slip the exclamation:

"Yes, it is a tiresome and monotonous town."

He divined, no doubt, the indiscreet question I was keeping back: "If it bores you so, why do you stay here?" for after some hesitation he added:

"But, what will you? It is after all better than a good many other German towns. . . . It is not too Prussian. . . . And one is pretty sure of not meeting any fellow countrymen one knows."

This last sentence struck my imagination, which began to work upon this scarcely sketched theme: I said to myself that M. de Sour-

belles had no doubt come to Weimar to be really alone, out of the way of the bores one finds at all the fashionable resorts, and that there were reasons for this course that I probably should never know. On the other hand my curiosity diminished in proportion as the sympathy with which he inspired me increased. In the end I should have resigned myself to accepting him as I found him, with his delicate mind tinged with melancholy, and his keen intelligence that was somewhat inclined to be paradoxical, congratulating myself on having met him and bothering no more about his past than that of Dr. Hort or of anybody else, when, one day, after the coffee we had been taking together, he said brusquely:

"I have to inform you, monsieur, that we meet to-day for the last time."

"What!" I exclaimed. "Are you then going away?"

He turned his eyes away and replied in a tone which he sought to render indifferent:

"No, I am not going away. . . . Mme. de Sourbelles was absent; she returns to-night . . . . I came to the Crown Prince Hotel because I was so lonely. Now it is all over; I shall return to my villa and resume my usual life."

I had a good mind to ask him why his wife's return necessitated the complete interruption of

our relations; but I suppressed the question which surprise had almost drawn from me.

I awaited a word of explanation. None was forthcoming. I felt a little hurt, I admit, especially as I had put myself out to make myself agreeable to him, and resolved to leave him coldly; but there was such cordiality in what he said afterwards, such sympathy, such evident regret in the grasp of his hand, that it was impossible for me to conceal the fact that I regretted to lose him, so that our farewell was positively friendly.

"This is very singular," thought I, "more singular than all the rest! He appeared to take pleasure in my company, we are foreigners, both of us, and compatriots at that, lost in a town that has little attraction for us, among these Goethrolatriates whose fetishism irritates us; what is there then to prevent him from inviting me to call upon him or, at the very least, to look me up occasionally at the hotel?"

As I still had a few days to pass at Weimar I fell back upon Dr. Hort, whom I had somewhat neglected, but who did not appear to mind.

The worthy savant continued to frequent the Goethe Museum, but his tastes had undergone some modification. He had grown tired of Betty's pretty, irregular featured face, and had taken a fancy to the dishevelled Maximiliane, upon whom he discanted with much exuberance.

"You have a romantic imagination," I said jokingly.

He defended himself against this charge to the best of his ability.

"Do not suppose," he said, "that I like Maximiliane on account of her badly combed hair: it is because she was unhappy. She had indeed a romantic imagination, as you say! Her imagination gave a dramatic color to Goethe's abandonment of her that I rather like."

"A vulgar story!" I replied, "on Goethe's part, at any rate. For that matter, your great man never had any but mediocre sentiments: he was one of those who only know how to love themselves. I have got my knife into him since I have been studying him. Those he deceived —he deceived all those who loved him—were better than he was."

I expected some protest, for the Goethe worshipers will not allow anyone to belittle their idol. Dr. Hort, however, merely shook his good, big, blond head as he replied, with a gleam in his eyes:

"Are not women, in these matters, always superior to men? In the first place, it is always the woman who suffers, and—must I admit it? —I have infinite sympathy with and curiosity anent her suffering."

We were walking in the park while exchanging these remarks, and just at that minute came in sight of the Sourbelles' little brick house, which

was as closely shut up and as silent as usual. Hort pointed to it with his walking-stick and continued:

"For instance, I would give a deal, a good deal, to know what goes on in there! For something is going on, of that I am convinced. . . And, as always, when something between a man and woman is going on, it is the woman who is the victim."

He sighed, then remarked:

"You are lucky, you, to have been able to talk with M. de Sourbelles."

"Oh!" said I with a shrug of the shoulders, "for anything he told me ——!"

"No matter, you have at least heard the sound of his voice. You got a direct impression from him. You were even in the position to feel something of his character and life."

"All that I know is that he does not give one the impression of being happy,—nor that of being a brute, I assure you."

"He told you nothing about *her*—about his mysterious companion, of course? Why does she always hide her face? Why did she go away? Why did she come back? I know well enough that all this is none of my business. . . But that only interests me the more."

There was in this naïve curiosity, which was too benevolent to be displeasing, and besides, was incapable of indiscretion, something really comical,

"Well, console yourself!" I said to the good savant. "It is probable that your unknown friends will go away one of these days as mysteriously as they came. Then, in addition to the other 'whys,' you will be asking yourself 'Why have they left?' Then you will forget all about them. So goes the world. We brush up against many mysteries, we know next to nothing about our neighbor—a fact which does not prevent us from judging him, on occasion. Believe me, it is better to occupy ourselves about ourselves—or about handsome ladies, dead a hundred years, who were so fortunate as to take the fancy of your Goethe."

Time passed, summer was drawing to a close, and the leaves of the old trees in the park were beginning to take on their autumnal tints. My work was well advanced and the time for my departure was drawing near. It was not without pleasure that I looked forward to it. I had breathed more Goethean air than my lungs could support, and I was tired of the queer little town which seems to be an anachronism, as much out of place in modern Germany as a cocked hat would be on the head of a Prussian general. I did not therefore suppose that I should see M. de Sourbelles again, or learn anything about him.

But one morning when I returned to dinner I met Dr. Hort in front of the hotel. He was visibly excited, and appeared to be as much sur-

prised at my calmness as I was at his agitation.

"Don't you then know anything about it?" he demanded.

"No, what is the matter?"

"Is it possible! Why, nothing else has been talked about for hours! Mme. de Sourbelles is dead!"

And lowering his voice:

"They do say that she has been poisoned!"

Thereupon he ran to the head cellar man who was lounging in the hall and who he thought would know something about it. The head cellar man recounted all he knew. The commissary of police had already been to the house; there had been an active exchange of telegrams between Weimar and Paris; it had been proved that it was a case of suicide; the woman had taken arsenic, and had suffered horribly; the body probably would be taken to France.

"And the husband?" I asked.

Gossip of the most contradictory kind about the state of M. de Sourbelles' mind was indulged in. According to some he was in despair; others averred that the tragical dénouement was his fault; at first some had even ventured the hypothesis that a crime had been committed. In speaking of him the cellar man smiled half disdainfully, with that hostile air which is readily assumed towards those one does not understand.

I was filled with an immense pity for this poor,

abandoned man, surrounded by suspicion, and who must be suffering horribly with a grief that was condemned to devour itself and which nothing could relieve. I could see him shut up in his villa, alone with his dead wife, his memories, his thoughts—his remorse, perhaps. I argued that the sound of a human voice would do him good, that inasmuch as we belonged to the same country I was the only one from whom he could hope for a little help. Nevertheless I did not like to ring at his bell. I wrote a line on my card, expressing my sympathy, and placing myself at his disposal if I could be of any assistance to him, and sent it to him by one of the hotel servants. A few minutes later I received an answer. M. de Sourbelles begged me to call upon him. I immediately responded to his invitation.

The house had that desolate appearance of homes where death has entered. Upset as I was I could not help noticing its aspect. It must have been furnished in old German fashion, for in the hall were heavy chairs, a table, and a hanging forged iron lamp in this style. I recognized the same style in the furniture of the drawing-room into which I was ushered; but there it was relieved by a number of objects of foreign origin. These denoted an elegant taste, the taste of a woman accustomed to the dainty things of a highly distinguished *milieu*, and who had sought to transplant something of this *milieu* to her

chance surroundings. Several pictures of the French school attracted my attention. Among them was a Besnard that I had admired at one of the Champs de Mars salons—the profile of a woman standing out in violet shade against the back ground of the setting sun. On the mantelpiece, on which the commonplace ornaments had been left, I remarked two precious vases by Émile Gallé. An open volume was on the table, together with two or three yellow covered books. The open volume was Jean Lahor's *Illusion*. From a work basket hung a piece of complicated embroidery, as though it had just been thrown there carelessly. Everything seemed to bear the reflection of the life that had animated it the day before and which had just died out:

I did not have much time to look about me, however, for M. de Sourbelles entered. I was seized with an emotion so poignant that my knees shook, so terribly painful was his appearance. He was no longer the man I had met such a short time before at the table of the Crown Prince Hotel, and whose bright chat touched upon all subjects with almost familiar frankness and ease. His handsome face was drawn and furrowed by wrinkles that I had not seen there; his swollen eyes gazed restlessly around him with haggard look; his hair was dishevelled; his unbuttoned shirt was open at his breast; the negligence of his attire and manner, which had formerly been so studiously

correct, showed that he had become indifferent to everything. He stopped at the door, looked at me with a despairing gaze, then as I approached him, he held out his hand and murmured in a choking voice:

" Thanks for coming."

I stammered a few words that he did not hear. He began to pace to and fro, his hands thrust in the pockets of his smoking jacket, with that air of a caged wild beast which indicates that excitement is at its paroxysm. Soon the narrow space of the little drawing-room was not sufficient for him and he went on into the dining-room of which I could see the high dresser with its ancient crockery. Long minutes passed in this way. Feeling that no words could relieve him I stood near the unfinished embroidery following him with my eyes. At length the bell rang. M. de Sourbelles started, and listened. A telegram was brought to him. He opened it, perused it, crumpled it up with a shrug of his shoulders and began to walk to and fro again. Suddenly he stopped in front of me.

" Pardon me for receiving you in this manner," he said, with a great effort to speak naturally. " You will excuse me, will you not ?"

I bowed. He continued:

" You know ?"

I nodded affirmatively.

" You know all ?" he repeated.

I replied gently:

"I know that a great sorrow has fallen upon you."

He wrung his hands.

"*Ach!*" he cried, employing that so expressive German exclamation. "No, you cannot know! . . . . . For it is too dreadful! . . . . She suffered horribly! . . . . You cannot imagine it! . . . . My God! My God! . . . . The death struggle was so long! . . . . You cannot imagine it, it is impossible!"

He repeated the same words, the same broken sentences without sequence. Then he resumed his walking, stopped in front of me, gazed long at me with an indescribable expression of sorrow and repeated what he had just said, or touched or displaced some object.

"Only yesterday she was reading this!" he said, picking up one of the volumes I had noticed on the table. "She also worked at this embroidery."

He fondled it awhile.

"She appeared to be so calm. There was nothing unusual about her. . . . Could I foresee it? . . . . We talked together affectionately, very affectionately. My God! how she must have suffered to—to inflict this torture upon me. . . . For she was good. . . . Poor, dear soul!"

Tears stood in his eyes:

"Yes, poor soul, noble, generous. . . . That was tormented so! Poor . . . . poor . . . ."

He burst into tears. With the movement of a

child that is hurt and looks around for help he stretched out his hands to me and fell into my arms. Then he drew back.

"Pardon!" he said. "I hardly know you. . . . You could not understand me. . . . But I am choking, choking because I have no one to whom I can tell it—tell it all! . . . . Oh! silence! . . . If you only knew how heavy it is to bear sometimes! . . . . I said nothing, I kept as quiet as I could. . . . Yet she heard me, she, she who ought never to have known it! . . . It is not my fault, for I did all that I could, all that I could! . . . . How she must have suffered! . . . . How she must have suffered!"

It was to this idea that he reverted ceaselessly; he was clearly thinking more about the dead woman's suffering than his own. He forgot himself. He was weeping in her stead for what she had borne. The pity with which he inspired me became the more keen. But what could I say to him? I squeezed his hand, and stammered clumsy words to assure him of my sympathy. However awkward I may have been, my sympathy did him good, for he thanked me.

"I felt that there was a tie between us," he said in calmer tone. "Yet I was scarcely polite when I quitted you. . . . I must have appeared strange to you. . . . musn't I? If you knew you would no longer be astonished at anything—at anything except at seeing me alive, now that she is dead!"

He stopped; walked twice around the room, then returned to me.

"After all, why should you not know?" he said. "Why should I not tell you everything? What does it matter now if anybody does know? It is she who ought never to have known. You will listen to me, won't you? Perhaps it will do me good to stir up these things. Come, then! . . . . Let us go to her! . . . I will not leave her alone. . . . No, I will not leave her alone. . . . Think of it, she has all eternity in which to be alone, away from me! . . . Come, will you?"

He quitted the drawing-room. I followed him to the first floor. He ushered me into a sort of boudoir, hung with dark-colored stuffs, cleverly disposed curtains obscured the light from the two windows. There in a shadowy twilight lay the dead woman upon a lounge, surrounded by a harvest of flowers that ladened the air heavily with their perfume. A long veil covered her entirely, through which her slim body was scarcely discernible. M. de Sourbelles gazed at her for a moment and took her hand beneath the veil.

"No," he said, "don't let us stay here! I could not talk before her! . . . Come! . . . Besides, we shall be close by, close by."

Then opening another door he showed me into a little room which he evidently used as his study.

"Be seated," he said, handing me a chair "I will tell you. . . . I will tell you."

And, sometimes seated opposite to me, his arm resting on mine, or his face buried in his hands; sometimes pacing up and down, or interrupting himself to go into the adjoining room, he told me in a broken voice the secret of his life, in about the following terms:

CHAPTER II.

M. DE SOURBELLES' LOVE TRAGEDY.

"Shall I relate everything? No, the details about the beginning of it are not necessary. Moreover, stories of this kind all resemble each other to start with, or, at least, appear to resemble each other. Ours, though, did not begin like others, that is, not quite. From the outset there was in our case something sudden, irresistible, fatal, a summer storm that a puff of wind prepares in the twinkling of an eye and which bursts before anyone has seen it coming.

"I was in garrison in a little town in the Departement du Nord . . . . Captain—captain of cavalry. I was bored. It was not of my own free will that I had chosen a military career, for I had no taste for it. I followed my destiny without uselessly rebelling, though not without regretting what it might have been and would not be; and these moments of regret were melancholy. I was thirty-four years of age. Up to that time I had lived like everybody else. I had had gallant adventures like most of my comrades, and mainly of the same order—facile, commonplace, taken up without effort, dropped without regret, soon forgotten. No love, except in my youth, one of those little sentimental affairs that one imagines one will never get over

and which leave but a slight remembrance tinged with ridicule. Naturally I did not realize that I was ignorant of what love was: on the contrary I imagined that I had loved much, suffered much, that I had had my share of exaltation and happiness. Mere foolishness! My passions, which were interrupted by every change of garrison, for which I would not have made the smallest sacrifice, which afforded me a little mediocre pleasure and had never cost me a tear—these were not love: I know it now well enough.

"In consequence of some administrative changes the sub-prefect of the town in which I had been stationed for several months was transferred elsewhere. His successor's name was—I will call him M. H———. There is no particular reason why I should not tell you his name, as our story did not remain secret. I prefer, however, not to pronounce it.

"The arrival and installation of the new sub-perfect were quite an event in the place, especially as M. H——— enjoyed a vague literary notoriety, having published a few books, two or three novels, some historical studies, I know not what. He was said to be witty, and his wife very handsome. It was thought they would instill a little animation into our social life which was utterly lacking in brilliancy. They arrived with the advent of winter, when the social season was just beginning. I soon met them, at a ball given in their honor by a family that I knew.

I was introduced to M. H——— in the smoking room. He displeased me to the point of irritation. He had a weak, cracked voice that set my teeth on edge. He spoke with volubility upon politics, literature, the fair sex; he knew something about everything, had a large fund of anecdotes and bons mots, and was self-complacent in the extreme. He was moreover very amiable, very considerate with a slight obsequiousness; knew how to interrupt himself to listen with an air of interest assumed with perfect art, to the remarks of a few notables—in short bore himself as a tactful man who is entering into strange circles without knowing just what his attitude ought to be but who is determined to make himself well viewed.

"I do not know how it came about, but in the course of the evening M. H——— took my arm, and we strolled off like a pair of friends towards the winter garden. I remember perfectly well that he was talking to me about the German Emperor whose impulsive character occasioned him uneasiness. I responded in monosyllables. Suddenly he said:

" 'Here comes my wife. Will you permit me to present you to her?'

"I looked at Mme. H——— who with another woman was advancing slowly and also looking at us. I was dazzled, dazzled out of my wits. Her husband presented me. We exchanged a few insignificant words which I did not hear, so

troubled was I by the sound of her voice. Then as M. H——— offered his arm to her companion, I mechanically offered mine to Mme. H——— and we walked through the salons.

"When I quitted her with a bow, and drinking in her look, we already belonged to each other, although we had exchanged only the most commonplace words. We feared both of us, I think, to spoil with words the ecstasy that was rising within us; perhaps, too, we experienced that vague fear of each other one feels at one's destiny when it takes shape and becomes threatening. We said nothing to each other, even our eyes repressed their eloquence; but I felt a sort of imperceptible thrill pass through her arm that touched mine, and each of the minutes we passed together in the midst of the crowd that we no longer saw, forged more strongly the chain that linked our two beings.

"The evening, however, advanced. M. H—— took his wife away. I saw her as she went off with him and her eyes met mine. Oh! how they spoke! How they expressed the mortal anguish of supreme sentiment. How they cried aloud the avowal that had not crossed her lips, how I heard them, how I understood them! It was a lightning flash: she was no longer there, I remained alone, with heaving breaet, happy, despairing, inebriated, mad—forced however to control myself and to hide my thoughts which I imagined radiated from me. I endeavored to

observe the faces of the people in the nearly deserted salons, and to listen to their talk. That they were making comments upon Mme. H——— goes without saying. I thrilled at certain phrases in which her name was pronounced.

"'She is wondrously handsome,' said somebody.

"I was filled with rage against the stranger who dared to admire her. A voice, however, replied:

"'Yes, she is handsome, but there is an air of coldness about her.'

"This stupid restriction irritated me still more. It evidently expressed the general impression, however, for somebody added:

"'An icy beauty!'

"Ah! the fools! They had only seen her with blind eyes! Whereas I, instantly, at the first glance, had realized that beneath this studied severity of appearances was a soul of fire. She burned me, was the subject of all my thoughts, agitated them, stirred them and whirled them in a giddy swarm. I ceased to listen and fled to lose myself in one desire—to see her again, everywhere, always!

"Then began for me an existence of anguish and intoxication. I lived a multiplied life, hypnotised by a sole thought which never left me, which absorbed all my strength, which was so intense that I could not have told whether it was pain or joy. It was always as at the end of

that ball, the briefest minutes of which I passed my time in evoking: I saw but her, although she was no longer there, I thought only of seeing her again. To meet her again however a great deal of ingenuity was required. Nothing is easy in small towns. In ours there was little sociable life, and previously I had scarcely mixed with it. All at once I became the most assiduous society-seeking officer in the garrison. I frequented all the houses that I could visit; I went to the theatre whenever a touring company visited the town, I did not miss one of the very ordinary concerts that were given twice a month.

"Sometimes I caught sight of her at the back of a box and was hardly able to make a salute to her which she would return with a look rather than with a gesture; or else, hidden in the recess of some drawing-room window, I passed interminable soirées on the watch until the lateness of the hour precluded further hope that she would appear; but sometimes she did come, and I spoke to her, heard her voice. At last she invited me to call upon her on her reception day. I went. Soon, by arriving before the usual hour —she, I felt well, was expecting me—I managed to snatch a few minutes alone with her. But what was that? At each meeting my love increased; it increased at each combination that brought us together, at each word, each look we exchanged; it increased without cease, it be-

came more tyrannical, more exacting, more impatient.

"It was a period of fever in which I had hours of madness, but which was not prolonged. There were none of the manœuvres common to amorous intrigues, no bargain between us. Our first avowal was decisive. For my part I did not experience the least internal struggle, the least hesitation, the least scruple. It was without any remorse that I went up to M. H——— and shook his hand, although I had the firm intention to take his wife away from him. I was calculating, deceitful, *rusé* and hypocritical, as much as I could be by nature, without its costing me the slightest effort. As to Mme. H——— who fortunately had no children, I do not know to what extent the ties of family, of custom, of society, of established affections, of duty, all the obstacles which sometimes delay and even avert the fatal issue of love, weighed in her mind. Women always have more virtue or more prejudices than men: she must have engaged in many struggles that I knew nothing about. Yet I think she traversed the phase of hesitation as rapidly as I did, and that she loved me as I loved her, that is to say, with absoluteness, not admitting that anything was more sacred or stronger than this love, or that anything could check or diminish it. She responded to my first appeal. She gave herself without beating about the bush, without coquettishness,

without resistance, out of the pure triumphant joy of belonging to him she loved and of intoxicating him with her being."

M. de Sourbelles paused for a moment. He was looking back at the past, resuscitating memories that his words evoked, thinking of these things of long ago, which he perhaps saw in a different light now that the destiny which their sweetness had inaugurated had been accomplished. Then he passed his hand over his forehead two or three times and continued:

"Yes, thus it was. Yet neither was corrupt nor perverse. She had never loved until she knew me, never desired love, never dreamed that she could deviate from the straight line of her life; she was imbued with good sentiments towards her husband and family, with respect for the social laws, fear of the world's judgments, and inclined to all that was pure and good—in fact she had all the ideas, all the opinions, all the beliefs, all the interests of an honest woman . . . . I myself was fairly scrupulous in such matters, having in my previous liaisons sought only pleasure and distraction, and once upon a time would have refused to sacrifice serious and respectable interests for the sake of self-gratification. On two occasions I even ceased to visit the homes of close friends of mine for fear of causing trouble, although this step was a great sacrifice. I was therefore—I can render myself this justice—an honest man,

perhaps even with more delicacy than the term usually implies when the senses are in question. Nevertheless I do not believe that a guilty liaison was ever established with more simplicity: it was as though we had always been destined the one for the other, as though our meeting had in an instant effaced all our past, wiped out all obstacles between our two lives. I only admired my mistress the more for it: I esteemed her noble and generous. I told myself that she confided in my love whole-heartedly, that she had given herself to me without reserve, without the petty hesitations or paltry calculation with which women are commonly prone to complicate the gift of their bodies; and attached to her by a stronger bond than any sacred tie I swore that she should never regret her confidence.

"You read novels, monsieur, you have told me so. Very well! You cannot have failed to remark that authors who describe liaisons of the same kind as ours are apt to discover in them germs of contempt, or at least of mistrust, and occasionally of hatred, as though beings whom love unites without reference to the social laws must perforce be enemies or accomplices. Certain of our moralists, to whom authority in such matters is ascribed, have developed the thesis that the man is inevitably inclined to distrust and disdain the woman who has given herself to him in defiance of her duty, because he apprehends that she will be as faithless to her new

troth as she was to that which he induced her to betray. They approve it. They profess to see in it a sort of justice, a moral, and what not, a guarantee for social order, a peril great enough to prevent the fault, to check upon the down grade hearts that look ahead into the future, greedy of the happiness they withhold . . . . Ah! monsieur, how I pity the poor creatures who know, experience, or imagine such sentiments! For their souls must indeed be low or pusillanimous, and incapable of the grand devotions and sublime sacrifices of love! . . . . No, no, I did not doubt her, in spite of the deceit into which I was dragging her. I could read her heart as an open book, as I am sure she could read mine. I knew that she was pure, in spite of all, through abnegation. I should have considered myself the worst of wretches had I entertained for her aught but infinite gratitude and a tenderness without limit.

"We were imprudent, careless of the usual ruses and precautions. We feared nothing except that we should not see enough of each other, although we were menaced by the ever wakeful inquisitiveness of a small town, and sure that it would be clear sighted. Moreover dissimulation weighed upon both of us: it seemed to be the sole blemish upon our love, the only fault we were committing. So without making up our minds to elope or to do any of those conspicuous things which partake of the reprehensible

character of bravado and cruelty we waited quietly for what was bound to happen in due course, accepting in advance without fear all the possible consequences.

"For my part I went further: I hoped with all my soul that the discovery of our relations would be made at once. For I did not love my love for the furtive rendezvous she gave me, for the short hours that I stole from her existence, for her hurried kisses, for our too brief moments of intimacy: I loved her with the impatient desire to consecrate my whole life to her, with that need of duration, that thirst of eternity, which is the stamp of real love, in the forgetfulness of all that was not she, with the complete devotion of my absorbed being. She loved me with equal ardor, although she was more timid; for however great their love may be women have an unconquerable fear of scandal. She did not escape this instinct of her sex. She trembled when she thought of the hour which we foresaw, which I desired, which she desired, too, when our dear secret discovered would rivet us the one to the other. When that hour struck, however, she proved herself very brave: it was as though the real danger had dispelled her fears, as though her last scruples had vanished at the decisive moment. I can still see her as she entered my room, where she had never come before, pale, but very calm and saying as she held out both hands to me:

"'He knows everything!'

"She gazed at me, confident, awaiting my answer.

"'Very well!' I said. 'Shall we leave?'

"She hesitated, though only for a few seconds, taking the final, supreme measure of her sacrifices, thrilled with a last thrill in face of the unknown future upon which we were about to enter.

"'When you like,' she replied.

"I had so often calculated what would have to be done in these circumstances that in a flash my mind decided upon the steps to arrange my departure from regular life with decency:

"'I shall require a few days to get ready,' I told her.

"She was not surprised at this restriction, which she knew was inevitable.

" 'Very well,' she said, 'but I shall not return home.'

"We at once agreed upon the place where she was to wait for me.

"We discussed with the greatest calmness our plan of conduct, the lines of which we decided without hesitation, as though it were the simplest matter in the world. This discussion, however, led me to ask her whether she suspected the intentions of her husband.

" 'No,' she responded, gazing at me frankly. 'I presume he will apply for a divorce. I hope so. What else can he do?——'

"She paused, but added almost immediately:

"'Since he has not killed me.'

"'True,' I said, 'there is nothing else left for him to do.'

"In reality I was thinking of other possible solutions, but I wished to spare her the fear or emotion the mention of them would cause her; I therefore pressed her as much as I could to leave.

"A few hours later, after a short absence I found on returning home M. H———'s card.

"It was most unexpected, unusual, incorrect —the only incident that I could not have foreseen.

"'Still,' thought I, 'a man in his position, if there be any sentiment about him, has a right to place himself above the habitual code that regulates the petty differences between men: he has the right to avenge himself as he deems fit.'

"I therefore at once sent word to him to notify him that I had returned and held myself at his disposal.

"Half an hour later he arrived.

"I supposed that he had come with the intention of killing me, and I was ready to defend myself, I assure you, for life was dear to me. I had only to look at him to understand that I had nothing to fear from him. He was a changed man, ravaged, and as it were ennobled, by an immense grief.

Never would I have believed that his insipid face could express such anguish nor that there

could be such a faculty for suffering in the insignificant functionary who only the previous day was fluttering and gossiping about the drawing-rooms of the town. I was expecting to hate him: I pitied him. Yes, he inspired me with profound pity, with that almost physical pity one feels in presence of the wounded and the dying. I would have liked to express my compassion for him, to show him I know not what bizarre sympathy. But we were enemies.

"I had risen when he entered. I handed him a chair. He refused it with a shake of the head, then dropped into it. He was panting. His hands twisted and stiffened upon his knees. Two or three times he opened his mouth to speak, but no words came. He avoided looking at me. At length, in a smothered voice, he murmured:

"'I have the right to kill you.'

"In his crushed condition this menace was almost ridiculous, I assure you, therefore I did not take it up.

"'But fear nothing,' he continued.

"At this word I could not repress a gesture, which he checked with a sign of his hand, a shrug of the shoulder, and even more with a look—with an undefinable look, a look that will always haunt me.

"'You do not understand me,' he explained. 'I know very well that you are not afraid. No; what I mean is that even though I have the right to kill you I shall never be an assassin.'

"He interrupted himself to repeat two or three times these mysterious words, which no doubt expressed long reflection that I could not know anything about:

" 'Besides ,who knows? . . . . Does one ever know?'

"Then there was an interval of silence. He was following his thought, suddenly distracted from the present, serious as it was, by something still more serious. I was a prey to an indescribable uneasiness. How I would have preferred an act of violence to this grief, which was so profound that it thought neither of bearing up nor of hiding itself, but overflowed before me who had caused it, as it might have done before a friend!

" 'Nevertheless,' he finally went on, the world cannot hold both of us. That is your opinion also, I presume?'

"I nodded affirmatively.

"'Therefore,' he continued, 'we must fight, fight to the death!'

"Again he was transformed. He was resolute and energetic, and there was a gleam of hate in his eyes. I preferred to see him thus. My pity vanished. I was face to face with a real enemy.

"'When you like, how you like,' I said.

" 'Good,' he exclaimed as though relieved, 'very good! I wished to see you although it is

not the regular thing . . . . You know . . . . So that we could understand each other . . . . before the seconds . . . . Seconds always try to diminish the risk of danger: what we must do is to increase it, on the contrary! . . . . We must impose our common will upon our seconds . . . . Can you shoot?'

"'Yes.'

"'So much the better. So can I. Well at fifteen paces, with aim . . . . until one of us is unable to fire any more. Does that suit you?'

"'Perfectly.'

"'I will manage not to have a doctor; you do the same . . . . They would stop us, perhaps.'

"I had some difficulty in making him understand that we could never find seconds who would consent to let us fight without a doctor being present. He kept repeating:

"'But in the army?'

"For a minute or two we discussed this question calmly, without violence, like persons separated only by a futile incident and anxious to agree. He gave way at last.

"'So be it!' he said. 'But between ourselves it is well understood that we stop only in the last extremity. One of us is in the way—in the way!

"Then, passing to another order of ideas, he began:

"'As to the pretext for the encounter ———'

"He considered a moment, then shrugging his shoulders with a gesture of utter indifference, concluded:

" 'Well, there is no need for a pretext . . . . After it is over everybody will know all about it . . . . So what does it matter?'

"He rose, stronger, calmer, restored, as though this prospect of blood consoled him.

" 'We are thoroughly agreed upon all points?' he queried again at the door.

"'Thoroughly agreed,' I replied.

"And he departed.

"The encounter took place the next day on the Belgian frontier, under the conditions decided between us.

"I was very calm, perfectly resolute, my conscience as easy as it would have been on the eve of a battle in which one kills or dies to do his duty. The life of this man, whom I had so terribly wronged and who had just spoken to me with a generosity I could not mistake, seemed to me to be totally insignificant. My own, too, for that matter. I knew very well that if the fortune of arms turned against me my love would not survive me, and as I cared for nothing on earth but her, I was ready to die. But I was resolved to defend myself to the best of my ability, that is to say, to do my best to kill M. H———, who stood between her and me. I repeat: I was indifferent alike to life and death,

since I knew that she was mine for death as for life. The only sadness I felt was at not seeing her, at having to pass away from her the hours which perhaps were to be my last."

Again M. de Sourbelles stopped to question me.

"Maybe you think me abominable?" he said. "If that be so it is because you have never loved! When one loves, all that is not love is effaced . . . . And then, is it our fault if life has absurd exigencies, if laws and customs are in flagrant contradiction with nature? I do not feel the least necessity for pleading extenuating circumstances in my favor, I assure you. Was it not revolting that this woman should be shackled for life to a man she did not love, and that I could have her only secretly, shamefully, I who adored her?"

It will be understood that this was not the moment to argue about my interlocutor's theories. And yet he gazed at me as though his conscience, aroused perhaps after being long dormant, needed a word to quiet or absolve it. But a man when he is of calm mind is by instinct the defender of established morals and of universally recognized institutions: when one is in a normal condition it is difficult to understand the views and excited condition of those who have ceased to respect these things; one regards such per-

sons as dangerous and feels rather like taking refuge from them. Although I greatly pitied the man who was struggling before me it was impossible to agree with him. I therefore answered evasively:

"There are times, in effect, when one sees things in a special light."

He looked at me as though he sought in my eyes the real sense of these vague words, understood that it was not that of approval, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Notwithstanding all that followed," he said, "I have not changed my point of view. No doubt I have regretted the fate of this gallant man, and have deplored the fact that he was my victim . . . . But I have never had any remorse —never. And I never shall have any."

His mournful attitude belied his words.

" Seeing that I am here," he continued, as if resuming his narration, " I need scarcely say what the issue of the combat was. M. H——— fired first; his ball grazed my neck. I returned the fire deliberately and shot him dead."

He paused and looked at me again. I had not a word to say. He rose and went into the next room, doubtless to ask of the dead woman whose lips were for ever dumb the words of comfort that she alone perhaps could have uttered. He remained a few minutes by her, returned, and paced two or three times around the little room twisting his handkerchief in his nervous fingers

as he did so. His emotion was extreme. He managed however to dominate it, reseated himself with an effort and recommenced in a smothered voice that gradually became firmer:

"A few hours later I had rejoined my love.

"She was far from expecting such a dénouement for I think she little knew her husband. She had always considered him to be a man of pacific disposition, prudent, and little subject to dangerous impulses, and she had never suspected that he loved her. I did not tell her about our interview. I allowed her to suppose that M. H——— had given way to an impulse due to amour-propre rather than to love. . . . . Alas! we could not tell each other everything! . . . . She also did not tell me all. I saw passing in her large terrified eyes a whole world of thoughts, but she did not give expression to them. I know not whether she was stricken in her heart or in her conscience, whether old memories thrilled within her, whether a secret voice was reproaching her cruelly for the blood that had just been shed. I can believe, I have reason to believe, that she suffered even more than I (M. de Sourbelles did not notice that he was contradicting himself), in her inmost heart, from the irremediable act that delivered us to each other, from that sort of complicity in—in crime, to call things by their conventional name—which henceforward formed the most sacred of bonds between us. But she did not say so: her habitual

impenetrability served her marvellously, as did also her force of character which I was to learn to know. I suppose she accepted the accomplished act with the energetic serenity that vigorous natures generally manifest in face of the irreparable. However this may be, never did she utter one word that could give me ground for suspecting that the tragic event has cast a shadow upon her conscience, and if she did suffer she was heroic enough to suffer in silence.

"You know the world, monsieur; you know that it is full of indulgence for compromises, for semi-faults, for situations in which there is nothing but cowardice, whereas it is pitiless towards those who break its moulds and cut loose from its hypocrisies. However we had neither the illusion that we could, nor the desire to, become reconciled to it one day, and we did not for a minute dream of imploring its pardon. We knew well that between us and the world there was something more insurmountable than any barrier. We realized that we were irrevocably separated from it, that our punishment and our reward were absolute isolation, an isolation in which we should be all in all to each other, in which we could have no other hope, no other joy, no other ambition, no other aim, in a word, no other reason for being than our love. Do you know that I am proud of having understood this at once, without experiencing the least appre-

hension at the terrible burden that we had to bear together, without regretting all that was behind me—family, friends and career? Positively. It seemed to me that my soul had expanded, that I had raised myself above life, that I was breathing a new, a free air. The earth now seemed to us to be but a scene of which we filled the foreground, while in the background glided invisible supernumeraries.

"I often thought then, monsieur, of a scene in some comedy whose title I do not remember, in which an ingenious moralist has very wittily depicted the fear, ennui, anticipated lassitude and especially the cowardice of a man whose ambition had been to dishonor a woman vulgarly, in a conventional manner, without breaking away from anything, and to whom that woman —a poor minded woman, I admit—came one fine day and offered herself wholly, for life. This situation, which was very human, as they say, made me laugh like everyone else and murmur: 'How true to life that is!' I felt that I could no longer even have smiled at it, that the only sentiment it would have aroused in me would have been a gentle commiseration for these two paltry, insipid souls, too puny for their destiny. I feared nothing. The future opened before me in a sort of splendor. I had entered into grand eternal love, and was wildly happy to feel myself walled therein, so to speak, with no chance of escape from it.

"Maybe the description of my sentiments is not particularly interesting to you? You would like to know what *hers* was, no doubt? . . . Ah! that is the question! . . . . Like all true women she kept the mystery to herself: that, perhaps, is why she inspired me with such love. . . . And then, for me to be able to know her some day, for me to be able to solve the delicious enigma that her words, her silences, her gaze, her caresses always were, other events than those which followed would have been necessary. Understand me well, I beg: we adored each other; but love had come so quickly, so violently, so blindly, that it had preceded intimacy. We were still unknown ground to each other. For my part I who had loved her without knowing her, continued in ignorance of her. I did not suffer from this then: my love excluded curiosity. But now I suffer that I never knew her. I shall suffer always."

Here ensued one of those feverish pauses by which M. de Sourbelles's narration was broken. He again returned to the dead woman's side. Although his absence lasted several minutes his singular preoccupation was not interrupted, for on returning he repeated:

"I was never to know her, never! . . . . For now all becomes confounded and confused; now comes the dreadful shock, hours of despair worse

than death, the mere remembrance of which is a lance that pierces me, a fire that burns me, an unsolaceable grief in which also is shame, yes, the shame of being a man, of having a weak and cowardly heart, a heart of mud.

"We had to leave the town, did we not? Well, the events I have recounted took place in the autumn. Where should we go to pass the beginning of the winter? We sought for skies that would suit us, and fixed upon a place in Italy, in the region of the lakes. We wanted to find a quiet, pretty spot favorable to forgetfulness and to happiness, a place sufficiently out of the way for us to be alone without being embarrassed by our isolation, away from the hostile crowd and from hotels, one of those places which kindly nature seems to have garnished expressly for certain conditions of mind. We knew of none which at that season of the year could better respond to our aspirations.

"In the pink villa which we had hired on the Italian shore of Lake Lugano days passed, days of infinite briefness. The waves, green with the reflection of the chestnut woods, murmured around the walls of our terrace that was odorous with the perfume of the *olea fragrans*. The little valleys that rose in gentle slopes from the lake towards the mountains were still carpeted with cyclamens. We thought of nothing. The past existed no more for us than did the rest of the world: the same mountains which barred

our horizon also shut out our recollections. 'When one has lived such days as these,' we said sometimes in those hours when we sought to fathom the unknown future, 'one has realised one's life, and it does not matter what may happen.' I believed that, monsieur. Then I fancied that one could lay in a store of happiness, as one saves money for one's old age. Alas! I have since learned that past happiness cannot compensate for present sorrow. I now know that the charm of the happiest hour evaporates in bitterness and desolation. My present suffering is as profound as my happiness was complete. But it will last longer . . . . It will last . . . . It will last."

A sob that he could not repress interrupted M. de Sourbelles. It took him a minute or two to control himself. Then he continued:

"We lived alone in that little villa. A woman of the district kept the house in order and prepared our meals, which were always extremely frugal. The little details of housekeeping that we had to look after amused us greatly. We were enchanted with everything. It was an idyll. There is at the bottom of our nature a childish playfulness that happiness brings out. How astonished would they have been, those who thought they knew my love and judged her cold, indifferent, or too serious—how astonished would they have been could they have seen her playing at housekeeping, laughing gaily at her

own awkwardness and rejoicing at her emancipation from the manners and customs of society women! As for me, I congratulated myself, as though upon a supreme victory, at having awakened the child in her nature, the delicious child, wilful and tender, sweet and fantastic, impulsive, full of surprises, ardent, made up of contrasts as real children are, that none save myself would ever know.

"One evening, after we had lingered on the terrace where the breeze was somewhat chilly—she was clad in a light dress, a dress of gauze, and had thrown a mantilla over her head—we thought we would take some tea. She was always amused when we had to serve ourselves. Comparing ourselves to children playing at getting dinner ready, we laughed heartily.

"'Shall we find what we require?' I asked.

"'We will see,' she replied.

"She fetched the tea, the sugar and a spirit lamp. As she was preparing it——"

M. de Sourbelles' voice sank almost to a whisper, as though it required an immense effort on his part to continue, and I could scarcely understand the few brief, broken sentences in which he summarized the accident:

"'Suddenly the lamp exploded . . . . I saw her enveloped in flames . . . . I rushed to her and wrapped a blanket round her . . . . She had not uttered a cry . . . . She only looked at me with despairing eyes . . . . She was covered

with horrible burns . . . . Her head, her face, her body . . . . all over . . . . all over . . . . Oh! my God!"

A long silence ensued. M. de Sourbelles leaned and writhed upon one of the arms of his chair, his face buried in his hands; he was doubtless living over again the details of the frightful scene; I could hear his panting breath punctuating his recollections.

"'Perhaps you know what to do in such a case?" he continued at length. "I did not . . . . I did what I could . . . . Think of it! I had to leave her alone for awhile . . . . Yes, alone . . . . while I sought help . . . . I had to wake up the neighbors, who did not understand me, try to explain to them as they leaned out of their windows . . . . They went for a doctor, but it was a long way off, at Lugano . . . . Oh! in what agony the hours dragged on! . . . . She was suffering horribly, but uttered no complaint, silent as she had always been at grave and critical moments, all her pain in her eyes. They followed me ceaselessly, those eyes; whenever I moved I could feel them fixed upon me; I divined their mute questions . . . . I turned around her, not daring to touch her poor peeled flesh . . . . When she asked for anything I tried to get it for her; that was all I could do. At last

I heard the doctor's carriage coming along the road. He had brought the necessary bandages and things. He examined her, attended to her, and reassured me.

"'It is horribly painful,' he said, 'but there is no danger: she will recover.'

"It seemed to me that the heavens became illumined, for I had thought that she was lost.

"Her recovery was slow, but some of the burns had penetrated deeply. . . . She lived, however. . . . The fever left her. . . . Her poor ravaged body restored itself by degrees. A few days were filled with the usual sweetness of convalescence. . . . But when she saw herself. . . . Oh! when she saw herself in the hand mirror that could not be refused! Profiting by one of the short minutes that I was not there, she asked the Sister of Charity who was watching beside her to give it to her. . . . When I returned she called me to her. The shutters were closed, the curtains drawn, and as the latter were thin, shawls had been pinned to them to shut out the light. Finding the room in darkness I at once guessed what had occurred. She took my hand, and murmured:

"'Go away from here! Leave me! I will not have you see me again!'

"I burst into tears, and covered with kisses her hand which she tried to withdraw. She herself did not cry. Summoning all her energy she went on firmly:

"'No, no, I will not have you love me. You must not love me any longer!'

"I said all that I could say. I swore that my love for her was eternal, that nothing could diminish it, that my life was hers as hers was mine, and—I know not what. And as I feared that in her despair she might do something desperate, I declared that I would not leave her for an instant until she had solemnly promised me not to entertain such wild thoughts. She yielded at last, and promised, but oh! with what sadness!

"'We will stay together, since you wish it,' she said. 'Maybe you would be still more unhappy were we to separate. . . . But when you wish to leave me remember that you are free!'

"Free! If you knew, monsieur, how I felt myself bound to her by a bond stronger than any that was ever invented by man, than by any solemn oath, any sacrament, any sacred word! . . . . I belonged to her by the strength of the pity I felt for her and by something more: I saw her as I loved her, with her beauty still vividly before my eyes. I rebelled at the very idea that a stupid accident could threaten the eternal character of my love. I flattered myself also with the hope of a complete cure.

"Naturally, we could not think of remaining in a spot where we had suffered so much: I could not bear the serene gaiety of the surrounding view. We left as soon as the doctor would

allow her to travel. Our desire was to find some place where we could abide without ever seeing a face we knew. Such a place could scarcely be found in Italy. There is not one of its little towns that is not overrun by tourists. It afforded us hospitality till the end of the winter, however. Then, weary of wandering from place to place, we resumed consideration of our plan for a permanent residence. I argued that there was less chance of meeting French people in Germany than anywhere else. Now, why did we select Weimar? I have not any idea. We came here by chance, the place pleased us because of its fine shady trees, we found it less Prussian than the other towns, the souvenirs of Goethe interested us, and thus our choice was made."

This part of his narration had cost M. de Sourbelles a visible effort. He paused an instant, gazed at me, made a vague gesture and continued:

"Up to this point, monsieur, I have been able to recount our history in its exact details. Now I hardly know how to go on. There are no more incidents, nothing further occurred. We were shut up in this house. We lived alone without hearing the sound of any other voices than our own and those of our servants, knowing nothing about those who surrounded us, nor of those we had quitted, nor of the world. Whatever took place was only in the tenebrousness of our in-

most selves, and we never disclosed it. We were guarded in our words, we weighed their sense and calculated their impression. Each wondered what the other was thinking. We had no confidant save our silence, which was eloquent and which seemed to speak to us. . . . Alas! there was something terrible between us—love that was dying, not naturally, gradually losing its fervor and ardor, becoming attenuated into a pure affection, a holy tenderness, but a violent death, in all its vigor, rebelliously resisting to the last, even as a man cut down in the fullness of his life, in the enjoyment of the completest happiness it can offer, and who clings to it with all the strength of despair.

"Oh! wretches that we are! . . . . Weak, weak, mean of heart, halt of soul! We uplift ourselves with all our desire towards the infinite of sentiment, towards that supernatural world where love blooms in the absolute, sheltered from the vicissitudes of our life. Vain efforts! We are dependent upon what we are, upon our senses, upon our external being, upon what is most lamentable in us!

"As long as she suffered and during her long convalescence I thought only of tending her, of saving her, of curing her. But when our regular course of life was resumed I could not help but see that she was no longer the same. She was ugly, with that ugliness of a spoiled, scarred body, with that ugliness which is the more—oh!

I will not say the word—which is the more painful, because it is not natural, which is an affront to our weakness. She was ugly, and the accident that had destroyed her beauty had not at the same time affected her youthfulness nor her power to love.

"And I?

"Oh! I was full of tenderness, pity, affection and devotion. I experienced towards her those sentiments that beauty and nobleness of soul can inspire. But it was love no longer—love had gone, had ceased to exist. I knew how she would suffer if she succeeded in reading my heart: what sentiments can replace love for women who still love? . . . And I lied with my words, with my looks, with my kisses; I played the comedy of love as best I could, with all my despair, with all the wild need I felt of loving in spite of myself until death! How can I express it? I know not. There are no phrases to express such a state, immobile, a sort of status quo in which nevertheless one loses ground every minute, for where is the woman who is not soon able to see through us? We cannot deceive them about our hearts, except when they are content to be deceived. This was not the case. She wanted to know; she had that thirst for cruel truth that was in her nature, and which moreover had always inspired her with a distrust that triumphant love alone had been able to overcome."

M. de Sourbelles stopped. His animation had

gradually increased to excitement. When he became calmer he resumed:

"I need hardly say that she never was here what she had been in Italy. There were no more outbursts of that joyous childishness which had enchanted me in our little pink house, no more gaiety, no more *abandon*. She had become the silent one of former days. I felt that she could read me in spite of myself, that she was not being duped, that I could not deceive her. . . . Now, I shall have no other thought than to recall her words, her gestures, her silences, to analyse them and try to find out what they meant, to interrogate my slightest recollections: for how could I live without knowing what was passing within her during that slow death-struggle of our love?

"Did she understand, and was she indulgent for this weakness of a poor heart which she had believed was stronger and better? Or did she esteem me contemptible, and were her silences full only of disdain? Or did these silences mask a sentiment similar to that I myself entertained, the despairing regret of the accident that had destroyed something of my soul as it had destroyed her beauty? . . . . I shall never know. Rack my memory as I may I shall not know. She took her secret with her. She never uttered a word that could have betrayed it. When you passed for the first time before our little villa, looking so gay in its bouquet of trees, you did not suspect, did you, monsieur, that they were

a curtain behind which was being enacted a drama that must seem to you a very exceptional one ?"

" Exceptional ? Not so very, perhaps ? I have often thought that in our case, hazard simply precipitated, by rendering it more tragical, the dénouement that was bound to come sooner or later. For love is not eternal: nothing is eternal, not even in the limited sense that we can accord to the word. Even had she remained beautiful we should eventually have ceased to love each other all the same, should we not ? Like so many others before us who have experienced this same illusion of eternity, like so many others who will experience it after us, and who in the same way will feel it breaking in their fragile hearts, like so many poor beings who have desired the impossible, that the reality has ankylosed, petrified, until they have fallen by a fall that is a very law of our nature, from exaltation to indifference—or lower! We at least did not drop so low; something preserved us, that very thing which was so rare and so tragical in our history—the solitude with which we were surrounded, our isolation in the midst of a world whose laws we had broken, the horror we had of renouncing our dream. Our love was mutilated, but its stump moved within us; if sorrow had replaced joy our internal life remained vibratory, feverish, and its quivers kept us drawn towards each other.

"I know well enough that in course of time sentiments become dulled. One cannot remain long in the acute state in which we were; one issues from it as one escapes from all strained and insoluble situations—through habitude. I sometimes used to think our destiny would be to gradually abdicate the love which we still desired, and to become resigned to the existence which was our lot. With the aid of time we should no doubt have done so and have found a sort of equilibrium. An incident, the consequences of which we could not foresee, changed all this.

"As I have already told you, monsieur, our rupture with the world had been complete. We had accepted it. In spite of the misfortunes that had befallen us, in spite of the doubts which assailed us, we never made any attempt to renew our relations with it. One of her sisters had alone kept up a correspondence with her. This sister, married to an unknown writer, living in Paris, in a *milieu* intelligent and independent, had, if not excused, at least understood the irresistible force of the passion that had thrown us together, more especially as she had always manifested an enthusiastic friendship for Mme. H———, who was her senior and more beautiful. This friendship seemed more precious to my love when all others had spurned her. Affectionate letters were exchanged at brief intervals between Paris and Weimar. I say affection-

ate, monsieur, not confidential; it was not in my love's nature to be communicative. Never did she tell her sister of what passed between us. So reticent was she, in fact, that she did not even inform her of her accident. When it happened and I had to write for her, I was instructed to say that she was slightly indisposed.

"A short while ago this much-loved sister became seriously ill. She wanted to see my love again; and a telegram from her husband came urging her to hurry to the sick woman's bedside. She left at once, her departure having been decided upon without our being able to discuss the many inconveniences that might attend it, and which presented themselves to my mind the same evening when, returning from the railway station, I for the first time in two years found myself alone in this house that was filled with so many thoughts."

Here M. de Sourbelles made a movement of unexpected sympathy. He bent towards me and took my hand.

"It was at this moment that I made your acquaintance, monsieur," he said. "The dread of solitude, or rather the imperious need I felt of fleeing from myself, drove me to the Crown Prince Hotel where I met you. Your conversation did me a great deal of good; I had been so long deprived of the benefits derived from asso-

ciation with men! Therefore it was not without sadness, or even without shame, that I resigned myself to breaking with you as I did. You must have thought me singular, to say the least. But now you understand, and I trust that if my conduct towards you—what shall I say?—caused you any pain or offence, you will bear me no ill-will."

I pressed his hand, which he had left in mine, and murmured a few words of sympathy—awkward words, I fancy, for on occasions like this one is always maladroit or does not know what to say.

"Her sister's illness," continued M. de Sourbelles, "having taken a favorable turn, my love returned. While she had been away I had written to her every day; she had replied with less regularity. The reserved tone of her letters occasioned me a singular inquietude. Alone in silence I could feel better than in our ordinary daily life what was separating us, the thoughts, the bitterness, the fears she did not avow, the vague danger that was hanging over us. Therefore I awaited her with the presentiment that her return would inaugurate a new phase in our existence, and in my impatience to see her again as soon as her arrival was announced there was almost as much anguish as joy. Nevertheless I was able to think at first that my apprehensions

were unfounded. You must remember that if there was no more love between us there were so many other ties! We were so indissolubly united in the desert we had created around us, we belonged so completely to each other! Separated, we had felt with a new intensity the weight of our solitude, having no longer the resources of our union to oppose to the cruelties of our memories. In the gladness of the return, in the comfort we felt at being together once more against the hostile world, we enjoyed a moment of forgetfulness, almost of happiness. Alas! it was but a moment!

"What had passed during her short return to ordinary life? Did she experience regrets and remorse, a remorse that passion had ceased to lull and that reflection had awakened? Did she suddenly suffer at being a pariah, deprived of the joys and consolations and customs of the world's life, condemned to play forever the comedy of love which was palling upon her, and the wearisomeness of which she had perhaps never taken into consideration? Was it simply that she had had the leisure to investigate the causes from which we were suffering and had recoiled from the abysses that she saw before her?

"However this may be, whatever may have been the motives which brought about the change I soon perceived that our respective positions were no longer the same. Not from any precise signs, reproaches, hard words, or

family squabbles; nothing of the kind occurred between us. But our humor was undergoing a transformation. After the death of love came that of the sweet and tender sentiments that had taken its place, of affection, of intimacy, of confidence. The lie that was our life became complicated. It was no longer upon a single point that we were deceiving each other, but upon all that passed within us, and we were reduced to a continual exercise of caution to prevent ourselves from manifesting the secret impatience we were concealing from each other. Alas! we could not hide it. Accustomed as we were to observe each other ceaselessly, to spy upon each other, to divine each other, we were the one to the other an open book, a book begun in intoxication, and each page of which as it was turned disillusioned us . . . . Ah! the horror, the horror, the awfulness of that last page!"

M. de Sourbelles had become calmer in the course of his narrative. This is the habitual result of confidences, which will ease the most heavily burdened hearts. But arrived at this point his painful impressions no doubt were aroused again with all their torturing acuteness. Seized once more with the fever of movement he rose, paced to and fro with great agitation, went into the next room and returned. He took no further notice of me. I thought he had forgotten that I was there. As I was about to rise from my arm-chair, however, he reseated

himself, and went on with long pauses between the sentences:

"What is the use of recounting the details of her last moments? If you knew, if you could know, how I adored her then! . . . . I no longer saw anything but the suffering of which I was the cause . . . . I saw but death that was approaching and which nothing, nothing, could avert . . . . death which she had sought . . . . death which ends all . . . . which left me alone, with the memory of her, upon the desert earth. And I felt that she was my flesh and my soul . . . . All the past whirled around me . . . . And I sobbed at her feet, I implored her pardon, I swore that I loved her, I begged her not to die . . . . She endeavored to hide her suffering, and now and then tried to smile at me . . . . Oh! with what a smile, in which there was such resignation! . . . . At first she had refused to take any remedy; then, yielding to my prayers she submitted to treatment as docilely as a child . . . . She knew that all efforts to save her were useless, that death was coming.

"'It is better so!' she said, 'during a moment's respite from pain. 'I am happy, I die in love!"

"She held my hand . . . . She did not let it go . . . . We were so united, so close to each other! . . . It was as in those first days . . . . There remained nothing, noth-

ing of what had spoiled our love. . . . . Death restored it to us. . . . death. . . ."

M. de Sourbelles gave way to his grief for a space· then rising abruptly he said:

"Come and see her!"

I followed him into the adjoining room, redolent with the sweet, heavy perfume of the mortuary flowers. He approached the bed, and with a resolute gesture drew aside the veil, disclosing the dead woman.

The traces of her burns, merged as they were in the uniform lividness of the face were scarcely visible; the features had recovered their beauty: a beauty calm, noble, serene, that contrasted so strongly with the agitation of her life, of which I had just heard the story! I know that her soul no longer shone in those extinct eyes, that they could not betray their secrets; but it was in vain that my imagination sought to picture this noble visage deformed by pain or by passion.

When I ceased to contemplate it, and turned towards M. de Sourbelles I saw that he was kneeling beside the bed and weeping.

EPILOGUE.

"Well done! You are a capital story teller," said Portal when he understood that Jacques D—— had finished. "Only your story is not complete. Your M. de Sourbelles, I imagine, did not pass the rest of his existence weeping for his mistress. What became of him afterwards?"

"There are beings," replied Jacques, "who seem to live only for a single moment, as there are flowers that only bloom once. After the supreme episode which has developed their soul to the limits of its power, what does it matter where they elect to live or how they pass their days?

"After the funeral of his love, as he liked to call her, M. de Sourbelles quitted Weimar, and went to visit that sister whom the dead woman had loved. I did not expect ever to see him again. I ran across him, however, last year, in one of those summer resorts where most unlooked for meetings often take place—at Houlgate, it was. We spent a rainy evening together strolling up and down the little promenoir. The plaints of the distant sea, which the low tide had borne away fell faintly upon our ears, and occasionally bursts of music from the casino orchestra reached us. He told me of the ennui of his

hours of idleness, of his aimless actions, of the memories in his heart that swayed him from regrets to remorse without cease. 'And I do not die!' he said among other things. 'One does not die, one does not kill one's self, one drags on with one's sorrow, one becomes accustomed to one's vulture. And I am not alone of my kind, believe me. There are many others like me, I am sure, who come and go, eat and drink, who sleep even, who do and say no matter what and who are tortured by invisible wounds. I have met a few such, here and there. They did not confide in me, nor I in them. We talked politics, argued fine arts, played at billiards or whist—and beneath the insignificance of our remarks, I felt that they were brothers, yes, brothers by silence and suffering!' He had aged, though not so very much, and his voice sounded strangely, like a voice heard from a distance. I was moved when I quitted him: he was nothing but a poor, drifting wreck."

"Bah!" exclaimed Portal. "The next time you meet him he will have been consoled. Perhaps he was even then consoled, on that beach at Houlgate. I have an idea that your imagination counts for not a little in his despair. Besides, permit me to say that I do not see what your story proves. You have told it to demonstrate to us that illegitimate lovers are wrong in bidding good bye to each other peaceably, once their little business is discovered, and returning

home. But I think more than ever that they are a thousand times right! Would you have it so that one couldn't engage in one of these adventures without its ending in a tragical catastrophe similar to this one, which caused you such emotion? No, no, I am not one of those who think that death is the good sister of love. Love is an exquisite thing and I don't quite see how we could get along without it, whereas the other. . . Brrr!"

Then turning to me he asked:

"What do you think about it, monsieur. Aren't you of the same opinion?

Jacques and I looked at each other and I replied:

"Of course!"

Jacques understood me and added:

"Perhaps you are right after all!"

And he rose to go.

"Don't make any mistake," remarked Portal. "We have done with romanticism. The best thing we can do in this world, which would be a dull place indeed if we didn't throw a little gaiety into it, is to amuse ourselves as much as we can."

"Evidently," acquiesced Jacques, who like myself had concluded that it would be a waste of time to discuss such questions with one whose way of looking at things was so entirely different from his own.

We left together, my friend and I. Outside I

began to discuss Portal, but he changed the conversation. As I had more than once remarked when he was offended Jacques preferred to keep silent. Therefore I did not insist and we walked on together, each engrossed in his own thoughts. We soon took leave of each other and I returned home, reflecting much upon the story Jacques had told, the conversation to which it had given rise, and the conclusions Portal had drawn from it. And once more I felt a great pity for poor mankind. Men are not bad, even in their worst faults. And even if they were their immense faculty for suffering would excuse in ennobling them. What rancor can be held against them for the wrong they have done either to that insensible abstraction the body social or to their own brethren: yea, what rancor can be held against those who are their own torturers? In learning to know them we pardon, and sometimes pity them.

I sought to analyse the sentiments of the unhappy M. de Sourbelles, whose history haunted my mind: I measured the space between his upward love-impelled flight and his fall into the nothingness of extinct love; I admired his patience and submission.

Then I forgot him. I thought confusedly of other histories, more or less similar to his, that I had become aware of, or guessed at, or heard of, with the details of which I was imperfectly acquainted, the heroes of which I had

judged with severity, sometimes with malevolence, and there recurred to me the words of the poet: "If I were God, I would take pity upon the heart of man." Beautiful words, of deep meaning and endless repercussion! For what a wealth of sentiment, what treasures of tenderness, kindness and courage are often lost sight of in what we designate as evil! What noble energies are sometimes expended by two hearts that seek to come together and which in breaking the numerous obstacles that separate them are broken themselves! How many ties that we condemn are far better than those woven by our laws! How many sacrifices made to the fault of love are as pure, purer perhaps, than those made to virtue! Yet we judge, we condemn, we disdain, we hate, without knowing, without understanding, proud of our codes, sure of our laws.

And as I reflected upon these things I fell a-dreaming for an instant of a world where, in default of God, even man would take pity on the heart of man.

THE END.