

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: L'Abbe Constantin

Ludovic Halevy

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BOOK 2.

CHAPTER IV. A RIOT OF CHARITY

The next day, at half-past five in the morning, the bugle-call rang through the barrack-yard at Souvigny. Jean mounted his horse, and took his place with his division. By the end of May all the recruits in the army are sufficiently instructed to be capable of sharing in the general evolutions. Almost every day manoeuvres of the mounted artillery are executed on the parade-ground. Jean loved his profession; he was in the habit of inspecting carefully the grooming and harness of the horses, the equipment and carriage of his men. This morning, however, he bestowed but scant attention on all the little details of his duty.

One problem agitated, tormented him, and left him always undecided, and this problem was one of those the solution of which is not given at the Ecole Polytechnique. Jean could find no convincing reply to this question: Which of the two sisters is the prettier?

At the butts, during the first part of the manoeuvre, each battery worked on its own account, under the orders of the captain; but he often relinquished the place to one of his lieutenants, in order to accustom them to the management of six field-pieces. It happened on this day that the command was intrusted to the hands of Jean. To the great surprise of the Captain, in whose estimation his Lieutenant held the first rank as a well-trained, smart, and capable officer, everything went wrong. The Captain was obliged to interfere; he addressed a little reprimand to Jean, which terminated in these words:

"I can not understand it at all. What is the matter with you this morning? It is the first time such a thing has happened with you."

It was also the first time that Jean had seen anything at the butts at Souvigny but cannon, ammunition wagons, horses, or gunners.

In the clouds of dust raised by the wheels of the wagons and the hoofs of the horses Jean beheld, not the second mounted battery of the 9th Regiment of artillery, but the distinct images of two Americans with black eyes and golden hair; and, at the moment when he listened respectfully to the well-merited lecture from his Captain, he

was in the act of saying to himself:

"The prettier is Mrs. Scott!"

Every morning the exercise is divided into two parts by a little interval of ten minutes. The officers gathered together and talked; Jean remained apart, alone with his recollections of the previous evening. His thoughts obstinately gathered round the vicarage of Longueval.

"Yes! the more charming of the two sisters is Mrs. Scott; Miss Percival is only a child."

He saw again Mrs. Scott at the Cure's little table. He heard her story told with such frankness, such freedom. The harmony of that very peculiar, very fascinating voice, still enchanted his ear. He was again in the church; she was there before him, bending over her prie-Dieu, her pretty head resting in her two little hands; then the music arose, and far off, in the dusk, Jean perceived the fine and delicate profile of Bettina.

"A child is she only a child?"

The trumpets sounded, the practice was resumed; this time, fortunately, no command, no responsibility. The four batteries executed their evolutions together; this immense mass of men, horses, and carriages, deployed in every direction, now drawn out in a long line, again collected into a compact group. All stopped at the same instant along the whole extent of the ground; the gunners sprang from their horses, ran to their pieces, detached each from its team, which went off at a trot and prepared to fire with amazing rapidity. Then the horses returned, the men re-attached their pieces; sprang quickly to saddle, and the regiment started at full gallop across the field.

Very gently in the thoughts of Jean Bettina regained her advantage over Mrs. Scott. She appeared to him smiling and blushing amid the sunlit clouds of her floating hair. Monsieur Jean, she had called him, Monsieur Jean, and never had his name sounded so sweet. And that last pressure of the hand on taking leave, before entering the carriage. Had not Miss Percival given him a more cordial clasp than Mrs. Scott had done? Yes, positively a little more.

"I was mistaken," thought Jean; "the prettier is Miss Percival."

The day's work was finished; the pieces were ranged regularly in line one behind the other; they defiled rapidly, with a horrible clatter, and in a cloud of dust. When Jean, sword in hand, passed before his Colonel, the images of the two sisters were so confused and intermingled in his recollection that they melted the one in the other, and became in some measure the image of one and the same person. Any parallel became impossible between them, thanks to this singular confusion of the two points of comparison. Mrs. Scott and Miss Percival remained thus inseparable in the thoughts of Jean until the day when it was granted to him to see them again. The impression of that meeting was not effaced; it was always there, persistent, and very sweet, till Jean began to feel disturbed.

"Is it possible" so ran his meditations "is it possible that I have been guilty of the folly of falling in love madly at first sight? No; one might fall in love with a woman, but not with two women at once."

That thought reassured him. He was very young, this great fellow of four-and-twenty; never had love entered fully into his heart. Love! He knew very little about it, except from books, and he had read but few of them. But he was no angel; he could find plenty of attractions in the grisettes of Souvigny, and when they would allow him to tell them that they were charming, he was quite ready to do so, but it had never entered his head to regard as love those passing fancies, which only caused the slightest and most superficial disturbance in his heart.

Paul de Lavardens had marvellous powers of enthusiasm and idealization. His heart sheltered always two or three grandes passions, which lived there in perfect harmony. Paul had been so clever as to discover, in this little town

of 15,000 souls, numbers of pretty girls, all made to be adored. He always believed himself the discoverer of America, when, in fact, he had done nothing but follow in the track of other navigators.

The world—Jean had scarcely encountered it. He had allowed himself to be dragged by Paul, a dozen times, perhaps, to soirees or balls at the great houses of the neighborhood. He had invariably returned thoroughly bored, and had concluded that these pleasures were not made for him. His tastes were simple, serious. He loved solitude, work, long walks, open space, horses, and books. He was rather savage a son of the soil. He loved his village, and all the old friends of his childhood. A quadrille in a drawing-room caused him unspeakable terror; but every year, at the festival of the patron saint of Longueval, he danced gayly with the young girls and farmers' daughters of the neighborhood.

If he had seen Mrs. Scott and Miss Percival at home in Paris, in all the splendor of their luxury, in all the perfection of their costly surroundings, he would have looked at them from afar, with curiosity, as exquisite works of art. Then he would have returned home, and would have slept, as usual, the most peaceful slumber in the world.

Yes, but it was not thus that the thing had come to pass, and hence his excitement, hence his disturbance. These two women had shown themselves before him in the midst of a circle with which he was familiar, and which had been, if only for this reason, singularly favorable to them. Simple, good, frank, cordial, such they had shown themselves the very first day, and delightfully pretty into the bargain a fact which is never insignificant. Jean fell at once under the charm; he was there still!

At the moment when he dismounted in the barrack-yard, at nine o'clock, the old priest began his campaign joyously. Since the previous evening the Abbe's head had been on fire; Jean had not slept much, but he had not slept at all. He had risen very early, and with closed doors, alone with Pauline, he had counted and recounted his money, spreading out his one hundred Louis-d'or, gloating over them like a miser, and like a miser finding exquisite pleasure in handling his hoard. All that was his! for him! that is to say, for the poor.

"Do not be too lavish, Monsieur le Cure," said Pauline; "be economical. I think that if you distribute to-day one hundred francs "

"That is not enough, Pauline. I shall only have one such day in my life, but one I will have. How much do you think I shall give to-day?"

"How much, Monsieur le Cure?"

"One thousand francs!"

"One thousand francs!"

"Yes. We are millionaires now; we possess all the treasures of America, and you talk about economy? Not to-day, at all events; indeed, I have no right to think of it."

After saying mass at nine o'clock he set out and showered gold along his way. All had a share the poor who acknowledged their poverty and those who concealed it. Each alms was accompanied by the same little discourse:

"This comes from the new owners of the Longueval two American ladies, Mrs. Scott and Miss Percival. Remember their names, and pray for them."

Then he made off without waiting for thanks, across the fields, through the woods, from hamlet to hamlet, from cottage to cottage on, on, on. A sort of intoxication mounted to his brain. Everywhere were cries of joy and

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astonishment. All these louis-d'or fell, as if by a miracle, into the poor hands accustomed to receive little pieces of silver. The Curb was guilty of follies, actual follies. He was out of bounds; he did not recognize himself; he had lost all control over himself; he even gave to those who did not expect anything.

He met Claude Rigal, the old sergeant, who had left one of his arms at Sebastopol. He was growing gray nay, white; for time passes, and the soldiers of the Crimea will soon be old men.

"Here!" said the Cure, "I have twenty francs for you."

"Twenty francs? But I never asked for anything; I don't want anything; I have my pension."

His pension! Seven hundred francs!

"But listen; it will be something to buy you cigars. It comes from America."

And then followed the Abbe's little speech about the masters of Longueval.

He went to a poor woman whose son had gone to Tunis.

"Well, how is your son getting on?"

"Not so bad, Monsieur le Cure; I had a letter from him yesterday. He does not complain; he is very well; only he says there are no Kroomirs. Poor boy! I have been saving for a month, and I think I shall soon be able to send him ten francs."

"You shall send him thirty francs. Take this."

"Thirty francs! Monsieur le Cure, you give me thirty francs?"

"Yes, that is for you."

"For my boy?"

"For your boy. But listen; you must know from whom it comes, and you must take care to tell your son when you write to him."

Again the little speech about the new owners of Longueval, and again the adjuration to remember them in their prayers. At six o'clock he returned home, exhausted with fatigue, but with his soul filled with joy.

"I have given away all," he cried, as soon as he saw Pauline, "all! all! all!"

He dined, and then went in the evening to perform the usual service for the month of Mary. But this time, the harmonium was silent; Miss Percival was no longer there.

The little organist of the evening before was at that moment much perplexed. On two couches in her dressing-room were spread two frocks a white and a blue. Bettina was meditating which of these two frocks she would wear to the opera that evening. After long hesitation she fixed on the blue. At half-past nine the two sisters ascended the grand staircase at the opera-house. Just as they entered their box the curtain rose on the second scene of the second act of Aida, that containing the ballet and march.

Two young men, Roger de Puymartin and Louis de Martillet, were seated in the front of a stage-box. The young ladies of the corps de ballet had not yet appeared, and these gentlemen, having no occupation, were amusing themselves with looking about the house. The appearance of Miss Percival made a strong impression upon both.

"Ah! ah!" said Puymartin, "there she is, the little golden nugget!"

"She is perfectly dazzling this evening, this little golden nugget," continued Martillet. "Look at her, at the line of her neck, the fall of her shoulders still a young girl, and already a woman."

"Yes, she is charming, and tolerably well off into the bargain."

"Fifteen millions of her own, and the silver mine is still productive."

"Berulle told me twenty-five millions, and he is very well up in American affairs."

"Twenty-five millions! A pretty haul for Romanelli!"

"What? Romanelli!"

"Report says that that will be a match; that it is already settled."

"A match may be arranged, but with Montessan, not with Romanelli. Ah! at last! Here is the ballet."

They ceased to talk. The ballet in Aida lasts only five minutes, and for those five minutes they had come. Consequently they must be enjoyed respectfully, religiously, for there is that peculiarity among a number of the habitues of the opera, that they chatter like magpies when they ought to be silent, to listen, and that they observe the most absolute silence when they might be allowed to speak, while looking on.

The trumpets of Aida had given their last heroic 'fanfare' in honor of Rhadames before the great sphinxes under the green foliage of the palm-trees, the dancers advanced, the light trembling on their spangled robes, and took possession of the stage.

With much attention and pleasure Mrs. Scott followed the evolutions of the ballet, but Bettina had suddenly become thoughtful, on perceiving in a box, on the other side of the house, a tall, dark young man. Miss Percival talked to herself, and said:

"What shall I do? What shall I decide on? Must I marry him, that handsome, tall fellow over there, who is watching me, for it is I that he is looking at? He will come into our box directly this act is over, and then I have only to say, 'I have decided; there is my hand; I will be your wife,' and then all would be settled! I should be Princess! Princess Romanelli! Princess Bettina! Bettina Romanelli! The names go well together; they sound very pretty. Would it amuse me to be a princess? Yes and no! Among all the young men in Paris, who, during the last year, have run after my money, this Prince Romanelli is the one who pleases me best. One of these days I must make up my mind to marry. I think he loves me. Yes, but the question is, do I love him? No, I don't think I do, and I should so much like to love so much, so much!"

At the precise moment when these reflections were passing through Bettina's pretty head, Jean, alone in his study, seated before his desk with a great book under the shade of his lamp, looked through, and took notes of, the campaigns of Turenne. He had been directed to give a course of instruction to the non-commissioned officers of the regiment, and was prudently preparing his lesson for the next day.

But in the midst of his notes Nordlingen, 1645; les Dunes, 1658; Mulhausen and Turckheim, 1674–1675 he suddenly perceived (Jean did not draw very badly) a sketch, a woman's portrait, which all at once appeared under his pen. What was she doing there, in the middle of Turenne's victories, this pretty little woman? And then who was she Mrs. Scott or Miss Percival? How could he tell? They resembled each other so much; and, laboriously, Jean returned to the history of the campaigns of Turenne.

And at the same moment, the Abbe Constantin, on his knees before his little wooden bedstead, called down, with all the strength of his soul, the blessings of Heaven on the two women through whose bounty he had passed such a sweet and happy day. He prayed God to bless Mrs. Scott in her children, and to give to Miss Percival a husband after her own heart.

CHAPTER V. THE FAIR AMERICANS

Formerly Paris belonged to the Parisians, and that at no very remote period—thirty or forty years ago. At that epoch the French were the masters of Paris, as the English are the masters of London, the Spaniards of Madrid, and the Russians of St. Petersburg. Those times are no more. Other countries still have their frontiers; there are now none to France. Paris has become an immense Babel, a universal and international city. Foreigners do not only come to visit Paris; they come there to live. At the present day we have in Paris a Russian colony, a Spanish colony, a Levantine colony, an American colony. The foreigners have already conquered from us the greater part of the Champs-Elysees and the Boulevard Malesherbes; they advance, they extend their outworks; we retreat, pressed back by the invaders; we are obliged to expatriate ourselves. We have begun to found Parisian colonies in the plains of Passy, in the plain of Monceau, in quarters which formerly were not Paris at all, and which are not quite even now. Among the foreign colonies, the richest, the most populous, the most brilliant, is the American colony. There is a moment when an American feels himself rich enough, a Frenchman never. The American then stops, draws breath, and while still husbanding the capital, no longer spares the income. He knows how to spend, the Frenchman knows only how to save.

The Frenchman has only one real luxury his revolutions. Prudently and wisely he reserves himself for them, knowing well that they will cost France dear, but that, at the same time, they will furnish the opportunity for advantageous investments. The Frenchman says to himself:

"Let us hoard! let us hoard! let us hoard! Some of these mornings there will be a revolution, which will make the 5 per cents. fall 50 or 60 francs. I will buy then. Since revolutions are inevitable, let us try at least to make them profitable."

They are always talking about the people who are ruined by revolutions, but perhaps the number of those enriched by revolutions is still greater.

The Americans experience the attraction of Paris very strongly. There is no town in the world where it is easier or more agreeable to spend a great dial of money. For many reasons, both of race and origin, this attraction exercised over Mrs. Scott and Miss Percival a very remarkable power.

The most French of our colonies is Canada, which is no longer ours. The recollection of their first home has been preserved faithfully and tenderly in the hearts of the emigrants to Montreal and Quebec. Susie Percival had received from her mother an entirely French education, and she had brought up her sister in the same love of our country. The two sisters felt themselves Frenchwomen; still better, Parisians. As soon as the avalanche of dollars had descended upon them, the same desire seized them both to come and live in Paris. They demanded France as if it had been their fatherland. Mr. Scott made some opposition.

"If I go away from here," he said, "your incomes will suffer."

"What does that matter?" replied Susie. "We are rich too rich. Do let us go. We shall be so happy, so delighted!"

Mr. Scott allowed himself to be persuaded, and, at the beginning of January, 1880, Susie wrote the following letter to her friend, Katie Norton, who had lived in Paris for some years:

"Victory! It is decided! Richard has consented. I shall arrive in April, and become a Frenchwoman again. You offered to undertake all the preparations for our settlement in Paris. I am horribly presuming I accept! When I arrive in Paris, I should like to be able to enjoy Paris, and not be obliged to lose my first month in running after upholsterers, coach-builders, horse-dealers. I should like, on arriving at the railway station, to find awaiting me my carriage, my coachman, my horses. That very day I should like you to dine with me at my home. Hire or buy a mansion, engage the servants, choose the horses, the carriages, the liveries. I depend entirely upon you. As long as the liveries are blue, that is the only point. This line is added at the request of Bettina.

"We shall bring only seven persons with us. Richard will have his valet, Bettina and I two ladies' maids; then there are the two governesses for the children, and, besides these, two boys, Toby and Bobby, who ride to perfection. We should never find in Paris such a perfect pair. "Everything else, people and things, we shall leave in New York. No, not quite everything; I had for gotten four little ponies, four little gems, black as ink. We have not the heart to leave them; we shall drive them in a phaeton; it is delightful. Both Bettina and I drive four-in-hand very well. Ladies can drive four-in-hand in the Bois very early in the morning; can't they? Here it is quite possible. "Above all, my dear Katie, do not consider money. Be as extravagant as you like, that is all I ask." The same day that Mrs. Norton received this letter witnessed the failure of a certain Garneville. He was a great speculator who had been on a false scent. Stocks had fallen just when he had expected a rise. This Garneville had, six weeks before, installed himself in a brand-new house, which had no other fault than a too startling magnificence. Mrs. Norton signed an agreement; 100,000 francs a year, with the option of buying house and furniture for 2,000,000 during the first year of possession. A famous upholsterer undertook to correct and subdue the exaggerated splendor of a loud and gorgeous luxury. That done, Mrs. Scott's friend had the good fortune to lay her hand on two of those eminent artists without whom the routine of a great house can neither be established nor carried on. The first, a chef of the first rank, who had just left an ancient mansion of the Faubourg St. Germain, to his great regret, for he had aristocratic inclinations.

"Never," said he to Mrs. Norton, "never would I have left the service of Madame la Duchesse if she had kept up her establishment on the same footing as formerly; but Madame la Duchesse has four children two sons who have run through a good deal, and two daughters who will soon be of an age to marry; they must have their dowries. Therefore, Madame la Duchesse is obliged to draw in a little, and the house is no longer important enough for me."

This distinguished character, of course, made his conditions. Though excessive, they did not alarm Mrs. Norton, who knew that he was a man of the most serious merit; but he, before deciding, asked permission to telegraph to New York. He wished to make certain inquiries. The reply was favorable; he accepted.

The second great artist was a stud-groom of the rarest and highest capacity, who was just about to retire after having made his fortune. He consented, however, to organize the stables for Mrs. Scott. It was thoroughly understood that he should have every liberty in purchasing the horses, that he should wear no livery, that he should choose the coachmen, the grooms, and everyone connected with the stables; that he should never have less than fifteen horses in the stables, that no bargain should be made with the coach-builder or saddler without his intervention, and that he should never mount the box, except early in the morning, in plain clothes, to give lessons in driving to the ladies and children, if necessary.

The cook took possession of his stores, and the stud-groom of his stables. Everything else was only a question of money, and with regard to this Mrs. Norton made full use of her extensive powers. She acted in conformity with the instructions she had received. In the short space of two months she performed prodigies, and that is how,

when, on the 15th of April, 1880, Mr. Scott, Susie, and Bettina alighted from the mail train from Havre, at half-past four in the afternoon, they found Mrs. Norton at the station of St. Lazare, who said:

"Your caleche is there in the yard; behind it is a landau for the children; and behind the landau is an omnibus for the servants. The three carriages bear your monogram, are driven by your coachman, and drawn by your horses. Your address is 24 Rue Murillo, and here is the menu of your dinner to-night. You invited me two months ago; I accept, and will even take the liberty of bringing a dozen friends with me. I shall furnish everything, even the guests. But do not be alarmed; you know them all; they are mutual friends, and this evening we shall be able to judge of the merits of your cook."

The first Parisian who had the honor and pleasure of paying homage to the beauty of Mrs. Scott and Miss Percival was a little Marmiton fifteen years old, who stood there in his white clothes, his wicker basket on his head, at the moment when Mrs. Scott's carriage, entangled in the multitude of vehicles, slowly worked its way out of the station. The little cook stopped short on the pavement, opened wide his eyes, looked at the two sisters with amazement, and boldly cast full in their faces the single word:

"Mazette!"

When Madame Recamier saw her first wrinkles, and first gray hairs, she said to a friend:

"Ah! my dear, there are no more illusions left for me! From the day when I saw that the little chimney-sweeps no longer turned round in the street to look at me, I understood that all was over."

The opinion of the confectioners' boys is, in similar cases, of equal value with the opinion of the little chimney-sweeps. All was not over for Susie and Bettina; on the contrary, all was only beginning.

Five minutes later, Mrs. Scott's carriage was ascending the Boulevard Haussmann to the slow and measured trot of a pair of admirable horses. Paris counted two Parisians the more.

The success of Mrs. Scott and Miss Percival was immediate, decisive, like a flash of lightning. The beauties of Paris are not classed and catalogued like the beauties of London; they do not publish their portraits in the illustrated papers, or allow their photographs to be sold at the stationers. However, there is always a little staff, consisting of a score of women, who represent the grace, and charm, and beauty of Paris, which women, after ten or twelve years' service, pass into the reserve, just like the old generals. Susie and Bettina immediately became part of this little staff. It was an affair of four-and-twenty hours of less than four-and-twenty hours, for all passed between eight in the morning and midnight, the day after their arrival in Paris.

Imagine a sort of little 'feerie', in three acts, of which the success increases from tableau to tableau:

1st. A ride at ten in the morning in the Bois, with the two marvellous grooms imported from America.

2d. A walk at six o'clock in the Allee des Acacias.

3d. An appearance at the opera at ten in the evening in Mrs. Norton's box.

The two novelties were immediately remarked, and appreciated as they deserved to be, by the thirty or forty persons who constitute a sort of mysterious tribunal, and who, in the name of all Paris, pass sentence beyond appeal. These thirty or forty persons have, from time to time, the fancy to declare "delicious" some woman who is manifestly ugly. That is enough; she is "delicious" from that moment.

The beauty of the two sisters was unquestionable. In the morning, it was their grace, their elegance, their distinction that attracted universal admiration; in the afternoon, it was declared that their walk had the freedom and ease of two young goddesses; in the evening, there was but one cry of rapture at the ideal perfection of their shoulders. From that moment, all Paris had for the two sisters the eyes of the little pastry-cook of the Rue d'Amsterdam; all Paris repeated his 'Mazette', though naturally with the variations and developments imposed by the usages of the world.

Mrs. Scott's drawing-room immediately became the fashion. The habitudes of three or four great American houses transferred themselves to the Scotts, who had three hundred persons at their first Wednesday. Their circle increased; there was a little of everything to be found in their set Americans, Spaniards, Italians, Hungarians, Russians, and even Parisians.

When she had related her history to the Abbe Constantin, Mrs. Scott had not told all one never does tell all. In a word, she was a coquette. Mr. Scott had the most perfect confidence in his wife, and left her entire liberty. He appeared very little; he was an honorable man, who felt a vague embarrassment at having made such a marriage, at having married so much money.

Having a taste for business, he had great pleasure in devoting himself entirely to the administering of the two immense fortunes which were in his hands, in continually increasing them, and in saying every year to his wife and sister-in-law:

"You are still richer than you were last year!"

Not content with watching with much prudence and ability over the interests which he had left in America, he launched in France into large speculations, and was as successful in Paris as he had been in New York. In order to make money, the first thing is to have no need of it.

They made love to Mrs. Scott to an enormous extent; they made love to her in French, in Italian, in English, in Spanish; for she knew those four languages, and there is one advantage that foreigners have over our poor Parisians, who usually know only their mother tongue, and have not the resource of international passions.

Naturally, Mrs. Scott did not drive her adorers from her presence. She had ten, twenty, thirty at a time.

No one could boast of any preference; to all she opposed the same amiable, laughing, joyous resistance. It was clear to all that the game amused her, and that she did not for a moment take it seriously. Mr. Scott never felt a moment's anxiety, and he was perfectly right. More, he enjoyed his wife's successes; he was happy in seeing her happy. He loved her dearly a little more than she loved him. She loved him very much, and that was all. There is a great difference between dearly and very much when these two adverbs are placed after the verb to love.

As to Bettina, around her was a maddening whirl, an orgy of adulation. Such fortune! Such beauty! Miss Percival arrived in Paris on the 15th of April; a fortnight had not passed before the offers of marriage began to pour upon her. In the course of that first year, she might, had she wished it, have been married thirty-four times, and to what a variety of suitors!

They asked her hand for a young exile, who, under certain circumstances, might be called to ascend a throne a very small one, it is true, but a throne nevertheless.

They asked her hand for a young duke, who would make a great figure at Court when France as was inevitable should recognize her errors, and bow down before her legitimate masters.

They asked her hand for a young prince, who would have a place on the steps of the throne when France as was inevitable should again knit together the chain of the Napoleonic traditions.

They asked her hand for a young Republican deputy, who had just made a most brilliant debut in the Chamber, and for whom the future reserved the most splendid destiny, for the Republic was now established in France on the most indestructible basis.

They asked her hand for a young Spaniard of the purest lineage, and she was given to understand that the 'contrat' would be signed in the palace of a queen, who does not live far from the Arc de Triomphe. Besides, one can find her address in the 'Almanach Bottin', for at the present day, there are queens who have their address in Bottin between an attorney and a druggist; it is only the kings of France who no longer live in France.

They asked her hand for the son of a peer of England, and for the son of a member of the highest Viennese aristocracy; for the son of a Parisian banker, and for the son of a Russian ambassador; for a Hungarian count, and for an Italian prince; and also for various excellent young men who were nothing and had nothing neither name nor fortune; but Bettina had granted them a waltz, and, believing themselves irresistible, they hoped that they had caused a flutter of that little heart.

But up to the present moment nothing had touched that little heart, and the reply had been the same to all "No! no!" again "No!" always "No!"

Some days after that performance of Aida, the two sisters had a rather long conversation on this great, this eternal question of marriage. A certain name had been pronounced by Mrs. Scott which had provoked on the part of Miss Percival the most decided and most energetic refusal, and Susie had laughingly said to her sister:

"But, Bettina, you will be obliged to end by marrying."

"Yes, certainly, but I should be so sorry to marry without love. It seems to me that before I could resolve to do such a thing I must be in danger of dying an old maid, and I am not yet that."

"No, not yet."

"Let us wait, let us wait."

"Let us wait. But among all these lovers whom you have been dragging after you for the last year, there have been some very nice, very amiable, and it is really a little strange if none of them "

"None, my Susie, none, absolutely none. Why should I not tell you the truth? Is it their fault? Have they gone unskilfully to work? Could they, in managing better, have found the way to my heart? or is the fault in me? Is it perhaps, that the way to my heart is a steep, rocky, inaccessible way, by which no one will ever pass? Am I a horrid little creature, and, cold, and condemned never to love?"

"I do not think so."

"Neither do I, but up to the present time that is my history. No, I have never felt anything which resembled love. You are laughing, and I can guess why. You are saying to yourself, 'A little girl like that pretending to know what love is!' You are right; I do not know, but I have a pretty good idea. To love is it not to prefer to all in the world one certain person?"

"Yes; it is really that."

"Is it not never to weary of seeing that person, or of hearing him? Is it not to cease to live when he is not there, and to immediately begin to revive when he reappears?"

"Oh, but this is romantic love."

"Well, that is the love of which I dream, and that is the love which does not come not at all till now; and yet that person preferred by me to all and everything does exist. Do you know who it is?"

"No, I do not know; I do not know, but I have a little suspicion."

"Yes, it is you, my dearest, and it is perhaps you, naughty sister, who makes me so insensible and cruel on this point. I love you too much; you fill my heart; you have occupied it entirely; there is no room for any one else. Prefer any one to you! Love any one more than you! That will never, never be!"

"Oh, yes, it will."

"Oh, no. Love differently, perhaps, but more no. He must not count upon that, this gentleman whom I expect, and who does not arrive."

"Do not be afraid, my Betty, there is room in your heart for all whom you should love for your husband, for your children, and that without your old sister losing anything. The heart is very little, but it is also very large."

Bettina tenderly embraced her sister; then, resting her head coaxingly on Susie's shoulder, she said:

"If, however, you are tired of keeping me with you, if you are in a hurry to get rid of me, do you know what I will do? I will put the names of two of these gentlemen in a basket, and draw lots. There are two who at the last extremity would not be absolutely disagreeable."

"Which two?"

"Guess."

"Prince Romanelli."

"For one! And the other?"

"Monsieur de Montessan."

"Those are the two! It is just that. Those two would be acceptable, but only acceptable, and that is not enough."

This is why Bettina awaited with extreme impatience the day when she should leave Paris, and take up their abode in Longueval. She was a little tired of so much pleasure, so much success, so many offers of marriage. The whirlpool of Parisian gayety had seized her on her arrival, and would not let her go, not for one hour of halt or rest. She felt the need of being given up to herself for a few days, to herself alone, to consult and question herself at her leisure, in the complete solitude of the country—in a word, to belong to herself again.

Was not Bettina all sprightly and joyous when, on the 14th of June, they took the train for Longueval? As soon as she was alone in a coupe with her sister:

"Ah!" she cried, "how happy I am! Let us breathe a little, quite alone, you and me, for a few days. The Nortons and Turners do not come till the 25th, do they?"

"No, not till the 25th."

"We will pass our lives riding or driving in the woods, in the fields. Ten days of liberty! And during those ten days no more lovers, no more lovers! And all those lovers, with what are they in love, with me or my money? That is the mystery, the unfathomable mystery."

The engine whistled; the train put itself slowly into motion. A wild idea entered Bettina's head. She leaned out of the window and cried, accompanying her words with a little wave of the hand:

"Good-by, my lovers, good-by."

Then she threw herself suddenly into a corner of the coupe with a hearty burst of laughter.

"Oh, Susie, Susie!"

"What is the matter?"

"A man with a red flag in his hand; he saw me, and he looked so astonished."

"You are so irrational!"

"Yes, it is true, to have called out of the window like that, but not to be happy at thinking that we are going to live alone, 'en garcons'."

"Alone! alone! Not exactly that. To begin with, we shall have two people to dinner to-night."

"Ah! that is true. But those two people, I shall not be at all sorry to see them again. Yes, I shall be well pleased to see the old Cure again, but especially the young officer."

"What! especially?"

"Certainly; because what the lawyer from Souvigny told us the other day is so touching, and what that great artilleryman did when he was quite little was so good, so good, that this evening I shall seek for an opportunity of telling him what I think of it, and I shall find one."

Then Bettina, abruptly changing the course of the conversation, continued:

"Did they send the telegram yesterday to Edwards about the ponies?"

"Yes, yesterday before dinner."

"Oh, you will let me drive them up to the house. It will be such fun to go through the town, and to drive up at full speed into the court in front of the entrance. Tell me, will you?"

"Yes, certainly, you shall drive the ponies."

"Oh, how nice of you, Susie!"

Edwards was the stud-groom. He had arrived at Longueval three days before. He deigned to come himself to meet Mrs. Scott and Miss Percival. He brought the phaeton drawn by the four black ponies. He was waiting at the station. The passage of the ponies through the principal street of the town had made a sensation. The population

rushed out of their houses, and asked eagerly:

"What is it? What can it be?"

Some ventured the opinion:

"It is, perhaps, a travelling circus."

But exclamations arose on all sides:

"You did not notice the style of it the carriage and the harness shining like gold, and the little horses with their white rosettes on each side of the head."

The crowd collected around the station, and those who were curious learned that they were going to witness the arrival of the new owners of Longueval. They were slightly disenchanted when the two sisters appeared, very pretty, but in very simple travelling costumes.

These good people had almost expected the apparition of two princesses out of fairy tales, clad in silk and brocade, sparkling with rubies and diamonds. But they opened wide their eyes when they saw Bettina walk slowly round the four ponies, caressing one after another lightly with her hand, and examining all the details of the team with the air of a connoisseur.

Having made her inspection, Bettina, without the least hurry, drew off her long Swedish gloves, and replaced them by a pair of dog-skin which she took from the pocket of the carriage apron. Then she slipped on to the box in the place of Edwards, receiving from him the reins and whip with extreme dexterity, without allowing the already excited horses to perceive that they had changed hands.

Mrs. Scott seated herself beside her sister. The ponies pranced, curveted, and threatened to rear.

"Be very careful, miss," said Edwards; "the ponies are very fresh to-day."

"Do not be afraid," replied Bettina. "I know them."

Miss Percival had a hand at once very firm, very light, and very just. She held in the ponies for a few moments, forcing them to keep their own places; then, waving the long thong of her whip round the leaders, she started her little team at once, with incomparable skill, and left the station with an air of triumph, in the midst of a long murmur of astonishment and admiration.

The trot of the black ponies rang on the little oval paving-stones of Souvigny. Bettina held them well together until she had left the town, but as soon as she saw before her a clear mile and a half of highroad—almost on a dead level—she let them gradually increase their speed, till they went like the wind.

"Oh! how happy I am, Susie!" cried she; "and we shall trot and gallop all alone on these roads. Susie, would you like to drive? It is such a delight when one can let them go at full speed. They are so spirited and so gentle. Come, take the reins."

"No; keep them. It is a greater pleasure to me to see you happy."

"Oh, as to that, I am perfectly happy. I do like so much to drive four-in-hand with plenty of space before me. At Paris, even in the morning, I did not dare to any longer. They looked at me so, it annoyed me. But here no one! no one! no one!"

At the moment when Bettina, already a little intoxicated with the bracing air and liberty, gave forth triumphantly these three exclamations, "No one! no one! no one!" a rider appeared, walking his horse in the direction of the carriage. It was Paul de Lavardens. He had been watching for more than an hour for the pleasure of seeing the Americans pass.

"You are mistaken," said Susie to Bettina; "there is some one."

"A peasant; they don't count; they won't ask me to marry them."

"It is not a peasant at all. Look!"

Paul de Lavardens, while passing the carriage, made the two sisters a highly correct bow, from which one at once scented the Parisian.

The ponies were going at such a rate that the meeting was over like a flash of lightning.

Bettina cried:

"Who is that gentleman who has just bowed to us?"

"I had scarcely time to see, but I seemed to recognize him."

"You recognized him?"

"Yes, and I would wager that I have seen him at our house this winter."

"Heavens! if it should be one of the thirty-four! Is all that going to begin again?"

CHAPTER VI. A LITTLE DINNER FOR FOUR

That same day, at half-past seven, Jean went to fetch the Cure, and the two walked together up to the house. During the last month a perfect army of workmen had taken possession of Longueval; all the inns in the village were making their fortunes.

Enormous furniture wagons brought cargoes of furniture and decorations from Paris. Forty-eight hours before the arrival of Mrs. Scott, Mademoiselle Marbeau, the postmistress, and Madame Lormier, the mayoress, had wormed themselves into the castle, and the account they gave of the interior turned every one's head. The old furniture had disappeared, banished to the attics; one moved among a perfect accumulation of wonders. And the stables! and the coach-houses! A special train had brought from Paris, under the high superintendence of Edwards, a dozen carriages and such carriages! Twenty horses and such horses!

The Abbe Constantin thought that he knew what luxury was. Once a year he dined with his bishop, Monseigneur Faubert, a rich and amiable prelate, who entertained rather largely. The Cure, till now, had, thought that there was nothing in the world more sumptuous than the Episcopal palace of Souvigny, or the castles of Lavardens and Longueval.

He began to understand, from what he was told of the new splendors of Longueval, that the luxury of the great houses of the present day must surpass to a singular degree the sober and severe luxury of the great houses of former times.

As soon as the Cure and Jean had entered the avenue in the park, which led to the house:

"Look! Jean," said the Cure; "what a change! All this part of the park used to be quite neglected, and now all the paths are gravelled and raked. I shall not be able to feel myself at home as I used to do: it will be too grand. I shall not find again my old brown velvet easy-chair, in which I so often fell asleep after dinner, and if I fall asleep this evening what will become of me? You will think of it, Jean, and if you see that I begin to forget myself, you will come behind me and pinch my arm gently, won't you? You promise me?"

"Certainly, certainly, I promise you."

Jean paid but slight attention to the conversation of the Cure. He felt extremely impatient to see Mrs. Scott and Miss Percival again, but this impatience was mingled with very keen anxiety. Would he find them in the great salon at Longueval the same as he had seen them in the little dining-room at the vicarage? Perhaps, instead of those two women, so perfectly simple and familiar, amusing themselves with this little improvised dinner, and who, the very first day, had treated him with so much grace and cordiality, would he find two pretty dolls—worldly, elegant, cold, and correct? Would his first impression be effaced? Would it disappear? or, on the contrary, would the impression in his heart become still sweeter and deeper?

They ascended the six steps at the entrance, and were received in the hall by two tall footmen with the most dignified and imposing air. This hall had formerly been a vast, frigid apartment, with bare stone walls. These walls were now covered with admirable tapestry, representing mythological subjects. The Cure dared scarcely glance at this tapestry; it was enough for him to perceive that the goddesses who wandered through these shades wore costumes of antique simplicity.

One of the footmen opened wide the folding-doors of the salon. It was there that one had generally found the old Marquise, on the right of the high chimney-piece, and on the left had stood the brown velvet easy-chair.

No brown easy-chair now! That old relic of the Empire, which was the basis of the arrangement of the salon, had been replaced by a marvellous specimen of tapestry of the end of the last century. Then a crowd of little easy-chairs, and ottomans of all forms and all colors, were scattered here and there with an appearance of disorder which was the perfection of art.

As soon as Mrs. Scott saw the Cure and Jean enter, she rose, and going to meet them, said:

"How kind of you to come, Monsieur le Cure, and you, too, Monsieur Jean. How pleased I am to see you, my first, my only friends down here!"

Jean breathed again. It was the same woman.

"Will you allow me," added Mrs. Scott, "to introduce my children to you? Harry and Bella, come here."

Harry was a very pretty little boy of six, and Bella a very charming little girl, five years old. They had their mother's large, dark eyes, and her golden hair.

After the Cure had kissed the two children, Harry, who was looking with admiration at Jean's uniform, said to his mother:

"And the soldier, mamma, must we kiss him, too?"

"If you like," replied Mrs. Scott, "and if he will allow it."

A moment after, the two children were installed upon Jean's knees, and overwhelming him with questions.

"Are you an officer?"

"Yes, I am an officer."

"What in?"

"In the artillery."

"The artillery! Oh, you are one of the men who fire the cannon. Oh, how I should like to be quite near when they fire the cannon!"

"Will you take us some day when they fire the cannon? Tell me, will you?"

Meanwhile, Mrs. Scott chatted with the Cure, and Jean, while replying to the children's questions, looked at Mrs. Scott. She wore a white muslin frock, but the muslin disappeared under a complete avalanche of little flounces of Valenciennes. The dress was cut out in front in a large square, her arms were bare to the elbow, a large bouquet of red roses at the opening of her dress, a red rose fixed in her hair, with a diamond 'agraffe' nothing more.

Mrs. Scott suddenly perceived that the children had taken entire possession of Jean, and exclaimed:

"Oh, I beg your pardon. Harry, Bella!"

"Oh, pray let them stay with me."

"I am so sorry to keep you waiting for dinner; my sister is not down yet. Oh! here she is!"

Bettina entered. The same frock of white muslin, the same delicate mass of lace, the same red roses, the same grace, the same beauty, and the same smiling, amiable, candid manner.

"How do you do, Monsieur le Cure? I am delighted to see you. Have you pardoned my dreadful intrusion of the other day?"

Then, turning toward Jean and offering him her hand:

"How do you do, Monsieur Monsieur Oh! I can not remember your name, and yet we seem to be already old friends, Monsieur "

"Jean Reynaud."

"Jean Reynaud, that is it. How do you do, Monsieur Reynaud? I warn you faithfully that when we really are old friends that is to say, in about a week I shall call you Monsieur Jean. It is a pretty name, Jean."

Up to the moment when Bettina appeared Jean had said to himself:

"Mrs. Scott is the prettier!"

When he felt Bettina's little hand slip into his arm, and when she turned toward him her delicious face, he said:

"Miss Percival is the prettier!"

But his perplexities gathered round him again when he was seated between the two sisters. If he looked to the right, love threatened him from that direction, and if he looked to the left, the danger removed immediately, and passed to the left.

Conversation began, easy, animated, confidential. The two sisters were charmed; they had already walked in the park; they promised themselves a long ride in the forest tomorrow. Riding was their passion, their madness. It was also Jean's passion, so that after a quarter of an hour they begged him to join them the next day. There was no one who knew the country round better than he did; it was his native place. He should be so happy to do the honors of it, and to show them numbers of delightful little spots which, without him, they would never discover.

"Do you ride every day?" asked Bettina.

"Every day and sometimes twice. In the morning on duty, and in the evening I am ride for my own pleasure."

"Early in the morning?"

"At half-past five."

"At half-past five every morning?"

"Yes, except Sunday."

"Then you get up "

"At half-past four."

"And is it light?"

"Oh, just now, broad daylight."

"To get up at half-past four is admirable; we often finish our day just when yours is beginning. And are you fond of your profession?"

"Very. It is an excellent thing to have one's life plain before one, with exact and definite duties."

"And yet," said Mrs. Scott, "not to be one's own master to be always obliged to obey."

"That is perhaps what suits me best; there is nothing easier than to obey, and then to learn to obey is the only way of learning to command."

"Ah! since you say so, it must be true."

"Yes, no doubt," added the Cure; "but he does not tell you that he is the most distinguished officer in his regiment, that"

"Oh! pray do not."

The Cure, in spite of the resistance of Jean, was about to launch into a panegyric on his godson, when Bettina, interposing, said:

"It is unnecessary, Monsieur le Cure, do not say anything, we know already all that you would tell us, we have been so indiscreet as to make inquiries about Monsieur oh, I was just going to say Monsieur Jean about Monsieur Reynaud. Well, the information we received was excellent!"

"I am curious to know," said Jean.

"Nothing! nothing! you shall know nothing. I do not wish to make you blush, and you would be obliged to blush."

Then turning toward the Cure, "And about you, too, Monsieur l'Abbe, we have had some information. It appears that you are a saint."

"Oh! as to that, it is perfectly true," cried Jean.

It was the Cure this time who cut short the eloquence of Jean. Dinner was almost over. The old priest had not got through this dinner without experiencing many emotions. They had repeatedly presented to him complicated and scientific constructions upon which he had only ventured with a trembling hand. He was afraid of seeing the whole crumble beneath his touch; the trembling castles of jelly, the pyramids of truffles, the fortresses of cream, the bastions of pastry, the rocks of ice. Otherwise the Abbe Constantin dined with an excellent appetite, and did not recoil before two or three glasses of champagne. He was no foe to good cheer; perfection is not of this world; and if gormandizing were, as they say, a cardinal sin, how many good priests would be damned!

Coffee was served on the terrace in front of the house; in the distance was heard the harsh voice of the old village clock striking nine. Woods and fields were slumbering; the avenues in the park showed only as long, undulating, and undecided lines. The moon slowly rose over the tops of the great trees.

Bettina took a box of cigars from the table. "Do you smoke?" said she.

"Yes, Miss Percival."

"Take one, Monsieur Jean. It can't be helped. I have said it. Take one but no, listen to me first."

And speaking in a low voice, while offering him the box of cigars:

"It is getting dark, now you may blush at your ease. I will tell you what I did not say at dinner. An old lawyer in Souvigny, who was your guardian, came to see my sister in Paris, about the payment for the place; he told us what you did after your father's death, when you were only a child, what you did for that poor mother, and for that poor young girl. Both my sister and I were much touched by it."

"Yes," continued Mrs. Scott, "and that is why we have received you to-day with so much pleasure. We should not have given such a reception to every one, of that you may be sure. Well, now take your cigar, my sister is waiting."

Jean could not find a word in reply. Bettina stood there with the box of cigars in her two hands, her eyes fixed frankly on the countenance of Jean. At the moment, she tasted a true and keen pleasure which may be expressed by this phrase:

"It seems to me that I see before me a man of honor."

"And now," said Mrs. Scott, "let us sit here and enjoy this delicious night; take your coffee, smoke "

"And do not let us talk, Susie, do not let us talk. This great silence of the country, after the great noise and bustle of Paris, is delightful! Let us sit here without speaking; let us look at the sky, the moon, and the stars."

All four, with much pleasure, carried out this little programme. Susie and Bettina, calm, reposeful, absolutely separated from their existence of yesterday, already felt a tenderness for the place which had just received them, and was going to keep them. Jean was less tranquil; the words of Miss Percival had caused him profound emotion, his heart had not yet quite regained its regular throb.

But the happiest of all was the Abbe Constantin.

This little episode which had caused Jean's modesty such a rude, yet sweet trial, had brought him exquisite joy, the Abbe bore his godson such affection. The most tender father never loved more warmly the dearest of his children. When the old Cure looked at the young officer, he often said to himself:

"Heaven has been too kind; I am a priest, and I have a son!"

The Abbe sank into a very agreeable reverie; he felt himself at home, he felt himself too much at home; by degrees his ideas became hazy and confused, reverie became drowsiness, drowsiness became slumber, the disaster was soon complete, irreparable; the Cure slept, and slept profoundly. This marvellous dinner, and the two or three glasses of champagne may have had something to do with the catastrophe.

Jean perceived nothing; he had forgotten the promise made to his godfather. And why had he forgotten it? Because Mrs. Scott and Miss Percival had thought proper to put their feet on the footstools, placed in front of their great wicker garden-chairs filled with cushions; then they had thrown themselves lazily back in their chairs, and their muslin skirts had become raised a little, a very little, but yet enough to display four little feet, the lines of which showed very distinctly and clearly beneath two pretty clouds of white lace. Jean looked at these little feet, and asked himself this question:

"Which are the smaller?"

While he was trying to solve this problem, Bettina, all at once, said to him in a low voice:

"Monsieur Jean! Monsieur Jean!"

"Miss Percival?"

"Look at the Cure, he is asleep."

"Oh! it is my fault."

"How your fault?" asked Mrs. Scott, also in a low voice.

"Yes; my godfather rises at daybreak, and goes to bed very early; he told me to be sure and prevent his falling asleep; when Madame de Longueval was here he very often had a nap after dinner. You have shown him so much kindness that he has fallen back into his old habits."

"And he is perfectly right," said Bettina, "do not make a noise, do not wake him."

"You are too good, Miss Percival, but the air is getting a little fresh."

"Ah! that is true, he might catch cold. Stay, I will go and fetch a wrap for him."

Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: L'Abbe Constantin, v2

"I think, Miss Percival, it would be better to try and wake him skilfully, so that he should not suspect that you had seen him asleep."

"Let me do it," said Bettina. "Susie, let us sing together, very softly at first, then we will raise our voices little by little, let us sing."

"Willingly, but what shall we sing?"

"Let us sing, 'Quelque chose d'enfantin,' the words are suitable."

Susie and Bettina began to sing:

If I had but two little wings,
And were a little feathery bird,

Their sweet and penetrating voices had an exquisite sonority in that profound silence. The Abbe heard nothing, did not move. Charmed with this little concert, Jean said to himself:

"Heaven grant that my godfather may not wake too soon!"

The voices became clearer and louder:

But in my sleep to you I fly,
I'm always with you in my sleep.

Yet the Abbe did not stir.

"How he sleeps," said Susie, "it is a crime to wake him."

"But we must; louder, Susie, louder."

Susie and Bettina both gave free scope to the power of their voices.

Sleep stays not, though a monarch bids,
So I love to wake ere break of day.

The Cure woke with a start. After a short moment of anxiety he breathed again. Evidently no one had noticed that he had been asleep. He collected himself, stretched himself prudently, slowly, he was saved!

A quarter of an hour later the two sisters accompanied the Cure and Jean to the little gate of the park, which opened into the village a few yards from the vicarage; they had nearly reached the gate when Bettina said all at once to Jean:

"Ah! all this time I have had a question to ask you. This morning when we arrived, we met on the way a slight young man, with a fair mustache, he was riding a black horse, and bowed to us as we passed."

"It was Paul de Lavardens, one of my friends; he has already had the honor of being introduced to you, but rather vaguely, and his ambition is to be presented again."

"Well, you shall bring him one of these days," said Mrs. Scott.

"After the 25th!" cried Bettina. "Not before! not before! No one till then; till then we will see no one but you, Monsieur Jean. But you, it is very extraordinary, and I don't quite know how it has happened, you don't seem anybody to us. The compliment is perhaps not very well turned, but do not make a mistake, it is a compliment. I intended to be excessively amiable in speaking to you thus."

"And so you are, Miss Percival."

"So much the better if I have been so fortunate as to make myself understood. Good-by, Monsieur Jean till tomorrow!"

Mrs. Scott and Miss Percival returned slowly toward the castle.

"And now, Susie," said Bettina, "scold me well, I expect it, I have deserved it."

"Scold you! Why?"

"You are going to say, I am sure, that I have been too familiar with that young man."

"No, I shall not say that. From the first day that young man has made the most favorable impression upon me; he inspires me with perfect confidence."

"And so he does me."

"I am persuaded that it would be well for us both to try to make a friend of him."

"With all my heart, as far as I am concerned, so much the more as I have seen many young men since we have lived in France. Oh! yes, I have, indeed! Well! this is the first, positively the first, in whose eyes I have not clearly read, 'Oh, how glad I should be to marry the millions of that little person!' That was written in the eyes of all the others, but not in his eyes. Now, here we are at home again. Good-night, Susie to-morrow."

Mrs. Scott went to see and kiss her sleeping children.

Bettina remained long, leaning on the balustrade of her balcony.

"It seems to me," said she, "that I am going to be very fond of this place."