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SERGE PANINE

By GEORGES OHNET

BOOK 2.

CHAPTER VII

JEANNE'S SECRET

In the drawing-room Jeanne and Serge remained standing, facing each other. The mask had fallen from their faces; the forced smile had disappeared. They looked at each other attentively, like two duellists seeking to read each other's game, so that they may ward off the fatal stroke and prepare the decisive parry.

"Why did you leave for England three weeks ago, without seeing me and without speaking to me?"

"What could I have said to you?" replied the Prince, with an air of fatigue and dejection.

Jeanne flashed a glance brilliant as lightning:

"You could have told me that you had just asked for Micheline's hand!"

"That would have been brutal!"

"It would have been honest! But it would have necessitated an explanation, and you don't like explaining. You have preferred leaving me to guess this news from the acts of those around me, and the talk of strangers."

All these words had been spoken by Jeanne with feverish vivacity. The

sentences were as cutting as strokes from a whip. The young girl's agitation was violent; her cheeks were red, and her breathing was hard and stifled with emotion. She stopped for a moment; then, turning toward the Prince, and looking him full in the face, she said:

"And so, this marriage is decided?"

Serge answered,

"Yes."

It was fainter than a whisper. As if she could not believe it, Jeanne repeated:

"You are going to marry Micheline?"

And as Panine in a firmer voice answered again, "Yes!" the young girl took two rapid steps and brought her flushed face close to him.

"And I, then?" she cried with a violence she could no longer restrain.

Serge made a sign. The drawing-room window was still open, and from outside they could be heard.

"Jeanne, in mercy calm yourself," replied he. "You are in a state of excitement."

"Which makes you uncomfortable?" interrupted the young girl mockingly.

"Yes, but for your sake only," said he, coldly.

"For mine?"

"Certainly. I fear your committing an imprudence which might harm you."

"Yes; but you with me! And it is that only which makes you afraid."

The Prince looked at Mademoiselle de Cernay, smilingly. Changing his tone, he took her hand in his.

"How naughty you are to-night! And what temper you are showing toward poor Serge! What an opinion he will have of himself after your displaying such a flattering scene of jealousy!"

Jeanne drew away her hand.

"Ah, don't try to joke. This is not the moment, I assure you. You don't exactly realize your situation. Don't you understand that I am prepared to tell Madame Desvarenes everything--"

"Everything!" said the Prince. "In truth, it would not amount to much. You would tell her that I met you in England; that I courted you, and that you found my attentions agreeable. And then? It pleases you to

think too seriously of that midsummer night's dream under the great trees of Churchill Castle, and you reproach me for my errors! But what are they? Seriously, I do not see them! We lived in a noisy world; where we enjoyed the liberty which English manners allow to young people. Your aunt found no fault with the charming chatter which the English call flirtation. I told you I loved you; you allowed me to think that I was not displeasing to you. We, thanks to that delightful agreement, spent a most agreeable summer, and now you do not wish to put an end to that pleasant little excursion made beyond the limits drawn by our Parisian world, so severe, whatever people say about it. It is not reasonable, and it is imprudent. If you carry out your menacing propositions, and if you take my future mother-in-law as judge of the rights which you claim, don't you understand that you would be condemned beforehand? Her interests are directly opposed to yours. Could she hesitate between her daughter and you?"

"Oh! your calculations are clever and your measures were well taken," replied Jeanne. "Still, if Madame Desvarenes were not the woman you think her--" Then, hesitating:

"If she took my part, and thinking that he who was an unloyal lover would be an unfaithful husband--she would augur of the future of her daughter by my experience; and what would happen?"

"Simply this," returned Serge. "Weary of the precarious and hazardous life which I lead, I would leave for Austria, and rejoin the service. A uniform is the only garb which can hide poverty honorably."

Jeanne looked at him with anguish; and making an effort said:

"Then, in any case, for me it is abandonment?" And falling upon a seat, she hid her face in her hands. Panine remained silent for a moment. The young girl's grief, which he knew to be sincere, troubled him more than he wished to show. He had loved Mademoiselle de Cernay, and he loved her still. But he felt that a sign of weakness on his part would place him at Jeanne's mercy, and that an avowal from his lips at this grave moment meant a breaking-off of his marriage with Micheline. He hardened himself against his impressions, and replied, with insinuating sweetness:

"Why do you speak of desertion, when a good man who loves you fondly, and who possesses a handsome fortune, wishes to marry you?"

Mademoiselle de Cernay raised her head, hastily.

"So, it is you who advise me to marry Monsieur Cayrol? Is there nothing revolting to you in the idea that I should follow your advice? But then, you deceived me from the first moment you spoke to me. You have never loved me even for a day! Not an hour!"

Serge smiled, and resuming his light, caressing tone, replied:

"My dear Jeanne, if I had a hundred thousand francs a year, I give you my word of honor that I would not marry another woman but you, for you would

make an adorable Princess."

Mademoiselle de Cernay made a gesture of perfect indifference.

"Ah! what does the title matter to me?" she exclaimed, with passion.

"What I want is you! Nothing but you!"

"You do not know what you ask. I love you far too much to associate you with my destiny. If you knew that gilded misery, that white kid-gloved poverty, which is my lot, you would be frightened, and you would understand that in my resolution to give you up there is much of tenderness and generosity. Do you think it is such an easy matter to give up a woman so adorable as you are? I resign myself to it, though.

"What could I do with my beautiful Jeanne in the three rooms in the Rue de Madame where I live? Could I, with the ten or twelve thousand francs which I receive through the liberality of the Russian Panines, provide a home? I can hardly make it do for myself. I live at the club, where I dine cheaply. I ride my friends' horses! I never touch a card, although I love play. I go much in society; I shine there, and walk home to save the cost of a carriage. My door-keeper cleans my rooms and keeps my linen in order. My private life is sad, dull, and humiliating. It is the black chrysalis of the bright butterfly which you know. That is what Prince Panine is, my dear Jeanne. A gentleman of good appearance, who lives as carefully as an old maid. The world sees him elegant and happy, and its envies his luxury; but this luxury is as deluding as watch-chains made of pinchbeck. You understand now that I cannot seriously ask you to share such an existence."

But if, with this sketch of his life, correctly described, Panine thought to turn the young girl against him, he was mistaken. He had counted without considering Jeanne's sanguine temperament, which would lead her to make any sacrifices to keep the man she adored.

"If you were rich, Serge," she said, "I would not have made an effort to bring you back to me. But you are poor and I have a right to tell you that I love you. Life with you would be all devotedness and self-denial. Each pain endured would be a proof of love, and that is why I wish to suffer. Your life with mine would be neither sad nor humiliated; I would make it sweet by my tenderness, and bright by my happiness. And we should be so happy that you would say, 'How could I ever have dreamed of anything else?'"

"Alas! Jeanne," replied the Prince; "it is a charming and poetic idyl which you present to me. We should flee far from the world, eh? We should go to an unknown spot and try to regain paradise lost. How long would that happiness last? A season during the springtime of our youth. Then autumn would come, sad and harsh. Our illusions would vanish like the swallows in romances, and we should find, with alarm, that we had taken the dream of a day for eternal happiness! Forgive my speaking plain words of disenchantment," added Serge, seeing Jeanne rising abruptly, "but our life is being settled at this moment. Reason alone should guide us."

"And I beseech you to be guided only by your heart," cried Mademoiselle de Cernay, seizing the hands of the Prince, and pressing them with her trembling fingers. "Remember that you loved me. Say that you love me still!"

Jeanne had drawn near to Serge. Her burning face almost touched his. Her eyes, bright with excitement, pleaded passionately for a tender look. She was most fascinating, and Panine, usually master of himself, lost his presence of mind for a moment. His arms encircled the shoulders of the adorable pleader, and his lips were buried in the masses of her dark hair.

"Serge!" cried Mademoiselle de Cernay, clinging to him whom she loved so fondly.

But the Prince was as quickly calmed as he had been carried away. He gently put Jeanne aside.

"You see," he said with a smile, "how unreasonable we are and how easily we might commit an irreparable folly. And yet our means will not allow us."

"In mercy do not leave me!" pleaded Jeanne, in a tone of despair. "You love me! I feel it; everything tells me so! And you would desert me because you are poor and I am not rich. Is a man ever poor when he has two arms? Work."

The word was uttered by Jeanne with admirable energy. She possessed the courage to overcome every difficulty.

Serge trembled. For the second time he felt touched to the very soul by this strange girl. He understood that he must not leave her with the slightest hope of encouragement, but throw ice on the fire which was devouring her.

"My dear Jeanne," he said, with affectionate sweetness, "you are talking nonsense. Remember this, that for Prince Panine there are only three social conditions possible: to be rich, a soldier, or a priest. I have the choice. It is for you to decide."

This put an end to Mademoiselle de Cernay's resistance. She felt how useless was further argument, and falling on a sofa, crushed with grief, cried:

"Ah! this time it is finished; I am lost!"

Panine, then, approaching her, insinuating and supple, like the serpent with the first woman, murmured in her ear, as if afraid lest his words, in being spoken aloud, would lose their subtle venom:

"No, you are not lost. On the contrary, you are saved, if you will only listen to and understand me. What are we, you and I? You, a child

adopted by a generous woman; I, a ruined nobleman. You live in luxury, thanks to Madame Desvarenes's liberality. I can scarcely manage to keep myself with the help of my family. Our present is precarious, our future hazardous. And, suddenly, fortune is within our grasp. We have only to stretch out our hands, and with one stroke we gain the uncontested power which money brings!

"Riches, that aim of humanity! Do you understand? We, the weak and disdained, become strong and powerful. And what is necessary to gain them? A flash of sense; a minute of wisdom; forget a dream and accept a reality."

Jeanne waited till he had finished. A bitter smile played on her lips. Henceforth she would believe in no one. After listening to what Serge had just said, she could listen to anything.

"So," said she, "the dream is love; the reality is interest. And is it you who speak thus to me? You, for whom I was prepared to endure any sacrifice! You, whom I would have served on my knees! And what reason do you give to justify your conduct? Money! Indispensable and stupid money! Nothing but money! But it is odious, infamous, low!"

Serge received this terrible broadside of abuse without flinching. He had armed himself against contempt, and was deaf to all insults. Jeanne went on with increasing rage:

"Micheline has everything: family, fortune, and friends, and she is taking away my one possession--your love. Tell me that you love her! It will be more cruel but less vile! But no, it is not possible! You gave way to temptation at seeing her so rich; you had a feeling of covetousness, but you will become yourself again and will act like an honest man. Think, that in my eyes you are dishonoring yourself! Serge, answer me!"

She clung to him again, and tried to regain him by her ardor, to warm him with her passion. He remained unmoved, silent, and cold. Her conscience rebelled.

"Well, then," said she, "marry her."

She remained silent and sullen, seeming to forget he was there. She was thinking deeply. Then she walked wildly up and down the room, saying:

"So, it is that implacable self-interest with which I have just come in contact, which is the law of the world, the watchword of society! So, in refusing to share the common folly, I risk remaining in isolation, and I must be strong to make others stand in awe of me. Very well, then, I shall henceforth act in such a manner as to be neither dupe nor victim. In future, everything will be: self, and woe to him who hinders me. That is the morality of the age, is it not?"

And she laughed nervously.

"Was I not stupid? Come, Prince, you have made me clever. Many thanks for the lesson; it was difficult, but I shall profit by it."

The Prince, astonished at the sudden change, listened to Jeanne with stupor. He did not yet quite understand.

"What do you intend to do?" asked he.

Jeanne looked at him with a fiendish expression. Her eyes sparkled like stars; her white teeth shone between her lips.

"I intend," replied she, "to lay the foundation of my power, and to follow your advice, by marrying a millionaire!"

She ran to the window, and, looking out toward the shady garden, called:

"Monsieur Cayrol!"

Serge, full of surprise, and seized by a sudden fit of jealousy, went toward her as if to recall her.

"Jeanne," said he, vaguely holding out his arms.

"Well! what is it?" she asked, with crushing haughtiness. "Are you frightened at having gained your cause so quickly?"

And as Serge did not speak:

"Come," added she, "you will have a handsome fee; Micheline's dower will be worth the trouble you have had."

They heard Cayrol's hurried steps ascending the stairs.

"You have done me the honor to call me, Mademoiselle," said he, remaining on the threshold of the drawing-room. "Am I fortunate enough at length to have found favor in your eyes?"

"Here is my hand," said Mademoiselle de Cernay, simply tendering him her white taper fingers, which he covered with kisses.

Madame Desvarenes had come in behind the banker. She uttered a joyous exclamation.

"Cayrol, you shall not marry Jeanne for her beauty alone. I will give her a dower."

Micheline fell on her companion's neck. It was a concert of congratulations. But Jeanne, with a serious air, led Cayrol aside:

"I wish to act honestly toward you, sir; I yield to the pleading of which I am the object. But you must know that my sentiments do not change so quickly. It is my hand only which I give you today."

"I have not the conceitedness to think that you love me, Mademoiselle," said Cayrol, humbly. "You give me your hand; it will be for me to gain your heart, and with time and sincere affection I do not despair of winning it. I am truly happy, believe me, for the favor you do me, and all my life long shall be spent in proving my gratitude to you."

Jeanne was moved; she glanced at Cayrol, and did not think him so common-looking as usual. She resolved to do all in her power to like this good man.

Serge, in taking leave of Madame Desvarenes, said:

"In exchange for all the happiness which you give me, I have only my life to offer; accept it, Madame, it is yours."

The mistress looked at the Prince deeply; then, in a singular tone, said:

"I accept it; from to-day you belong to me."

Marechal took Pierre by the arm and led him outside.

"The Prince has just uttered words which remind me of Antonio saying to the Jew in 'The Merchant of Venice': 'Thy ducats in exchange for a pound of my flesh.' Madame Desvarenes loves her daughter with a more formidable love than Shylock had for his gold. The Prince will do well to be exact in his payments of the happiness which he has promised."

CHAPTER VIII

A PLEASANT UNDERSTANDING

The day following this memorable evening, Pierre left for Algeria, notwithstanding the prayers of Madame Desvarenes who wished to keep him near her. He was going to finish his labors. He promised to return in time for the wedding. The mistress, wishing to give him some compensation, offered him the management of the mills at Jouy, saying:

"So that if you are not my son, you will be at least my partner. And if I do not leave you all my money at my death, I can enrich you during my life."

Pierre would not accept. He would not have it said that in wishing to marry Micheline he had tried to make a speculation. He wished to leave that house where he had hoped to spend his life, empty-handed, so that no one could doubt that it was the woman he loved in Micheline and not the heiress. He had been offered a splendid appointment in Savoy as manager of some mines; he would find there at the same time profit and happiness, because there were interesting scientific studies to be made in order to enable him to carry on the work creditably. He resolved to throw himself heart and soul into the work and seek forgetfulness in study.

In the mansion of the Rue Saint-Dominique the marriage preparations were carried on with great despatch. On the one side the Prince, and on the other Cayrol, were eager for the day: the one because he saw the realization of his ambitious dreams, the other because he loved so madly. Serge, gracious and attentive, allowed himself to be adored by Micheline, who was never weary of listening to and looking at him whom she loved. It was a sort of delirium that had taken possession of the young girl. Madame Desvarenes looked on the metamorphosis in her child with amazement. The old Micheline, naturally indolent and cold, just living with the indolence of an odalisque stretched on silk cushions, had changed into a lively, loving sweetheart, with sparkling eyes and cheerful lips. Like those lowers which the sun causes to bloom and be fragrant, so Micheline under a look from Serge became animated and grown handsomer.

The mother looked on with bitterness; she spoke of this transformation in her child with ironical disdain, She was sure Micheline was not in earnest; only a doll was capable of falling in love so foolishly with a man for his personal beauty. For to her mind the Prince was as regards mental power painfully deficient. No sense, dumb as soon as the conversation took a serious turn, only able to talk dress like a woman, or about horses like a jockey. And it was such a person upon whom Micheline literally doted! The mistress felt humiliated; she dared not say anything to her daughter, but she relieved herself in company of Marechal, whose discretion she could trust, and whom she willingly called the tomb of her secrets.

Marechal listened patiently to the confidences of Madame Desvarenes, and he tried to fight against the growing animosity of the mistress toward her future son-in-law. Not that he liked the Prince--he was too much on Pierre's side to be well disposed toward Panine; but with his good sense he saw that Madame Desvarenes would find it advantageous to overcome her feeling of dislike. And when the mistress, so formidable toward everybody except her daughter, cried with rage:

"That Micheline! I have just seen her again in the garden, hanging on the arm of that great lanky fellow, her eyes fixed on his like a lark fascinated by a looking-glass. What on earth has happened to her that she should be in such a state?"

Marechal interrupted her gently.

"All fair people are like that," he affirmed with ironical gayety. "You cannot understand it, Madame; you are dark."

Then Madame Desvarenes became angry.

"Be quiet," she said, "you are stupid! She ought to have a shower-bath! She is mad!"

As for Cayrol he lived in ecstasy, like an Italian kneeling before a madonna. He had never been so happy; he was overwhelmed with joy. Until

then, he had only thought of business matters. To be rich was the aim of his life; and now he was going to work for happiness. It was all pleasure for him. He was not blase; he amused himself like a child, adorning the rooms which were to be occupied by Jeanne. To his mind nothing was too expensive for the temple of his goddess, as he said, with a loud laugh which lighted up his whole face. And when he spoke of his love's future nest, he exclaimed, with a voluptuous shiver:

"It is charming; a veritable little paradise!" Then the financier shone through all, and he added:

"And I know what it costs!"

But he did not grudge his money. He knew he would get the interest of it back. On one subject he was anxious--Mademoiselle de Cernay's health. Since the day of their engagement, Jeanne had become more serious and dull. She had grown thin and her eyes were sunken as if she wept in secret. When he spoke of his fears to Madame Desvarenes, the latter said:

"These young girls are so senseless. The notion of marriage puts them in such an incomprehensible state! Look at my daughter. She chatters like a magpie and skips about like a kid. She has two glow-worms under her eyelids! As to Jeanne, that's another affair; she has the matrimonial melancholy, and has the air of a young victim. Leave them alone; it will all come right. But you must admit that the gayety of the one is at least as irritating as the languor of the other!"

Cayrol, somewhat reassured by this explanation, and thinking, like her, that it was the uncertainties of marriage which were troubling Jeanne, no longer attached any importance to her sad appearance. Micheline and Serge isolated themselves completely. They fled to the garden as soon as any one ventured into the drawing room, to interrupt their tete-a-tete. If visitors came to the garden they took refuge in the conservatory.

This manoeuvre pleased Serge, because he always felt uncomfortable in Jeanne's presence. Mademoiselle de Cernay had a peculiar wrinkle on her brow whenever she saw Micheline passing before her hanging on the arm of the Prince, which tormented him. They were obliged to meet at table in the evening, for Serge and Cayrol dined at the Rue Saint-Dominique. The Prince talked in whispers to Micheline, but every now and then he was obliged to speak to Jeanne. These were painful moments to Serge. He was always in dread of some outburst, knowing her ardent and passionate nature. Thus, before Jeanne, he made Micheline behave in a less demonstrative manner. Mademoiselle Desvarenes was proud of this reserve, and thought it was tact and good breeding on the part of the Prince, without doubting that what she thought reserve in the man of the world was the prudence of an anxious lover.

Jeanne endured the tortures of Hades. Too proud to say anything after the explanation she had had with Serge, too much smitten to bear calmly the sight of her rival's happiness, she saw draw near with deep horror the moment when she would belong to the man whom she had determined to

marry although she did not love him. She once thought of breaking off the engagement; as she could not belong to the man whom she adored, at least she could belong to herself. But the thought of the struggle she would have to sustain with those who surrounded her, stopped her. What would she do at Madame Desvarenes's? She would have to witness the happiness of Micheline and Serge. She would rather leave the house.

With Cayrol at least she could go away; she would be free, and perhaps the esteem which she would surely have for her husband would do instead of love. Sisterly or filial love, in fact the least affection, would satisfy the poor man, who was willing to accept anything from Jeanne. And she would not have that group of Serge and Micheline before her eyes, always walking round the lawn and disappearing arm in arm down the narrow walks. She would not have the continual murmur of their love-making in her ears, a murmur broken by the sound of kisses when they reached shady corners.

One evening, when Serge appeared in the little drawing-room of the Rue Saint-Dominique, he found Madame Desvarenes alone. She looked serious, as if some important business were pending. She stood before the fireplace; her hands crossed behind her back like a man. Apparently, she had sought to be alone. Cayrol, Jeanne, and Micheline were in the garden. Serge felt uneasy. He had a presentiment of trouble. But determined to make the best of it, whatever it might be, he looked pleasant and bowed to Madame Desvarenes, without his face betraying his uneasiness.

"Good-day, Prince; you are early this evening, though not so early as Cayrol; but then he does not quite know what he is doing now. Sit down, I want to talk to you. You know that a young lady like Mademoiselle Desvarenes cannot get married without her engagement being much talked about. Tongues have been very busy, and pens too. I have heard a lot of scandal and have received heaps of anonymous letters about you."

Serge gave a start of indignation.

"Don't be uneasy," continued the mistress. "I did not heed the tales, and I burned the letters. Some said you were a dissolute man, capable of anything to gain your object. Others insinuated that you were not a Prince, that you were not a Pole, but the son of a Russian coachman and a little dressmaker of Les Ternes; that you had lived at the expense of Mademoiselle Anna Monplaisir, the star of the Varietes Theatre, and that you were bent on marrying to pay your debts with my daughter's money."

Panine, pale as death, rose up and said, in a stifled voice:

"Madame!"

"Sit down, my dear child," interrupted the mistress. "If I tell you these things, it is because I have the proofs that they are untrue. Otherwise, I would not have given myself the trouble to talk to you about them. I would have shown you the door and there would have been an end of it. Certainly, you are not an angel; but the peccadillos which you

have been guilty of are those which one forgives in a son, and which in a son-in-law makes some mothers smile. You are a Prince, you are handsome, and you have been loved. You were then a bachelor; and it was your own affair. But now, you are going to be, in about ten days, the husband of my daughter, and it is necessary for us to make certain arrangements. Therefore, I waited to see you, to speak of your wife, of yourself, and of me."

What Madame Desvarenes had just said relieved Serge of a great weight. He felt so happy that he resolved to do everything in his power to please the mother of his betrothed.

"Speak, Madame," he exclaimed. "I am listening to you with attention and confidence. I am sure that from you I can only expect goodness and sense."

The mistress smiled.

"Oh, I know you have a gilt tongue, my handsome friend, but I don't pay myself with words, and I, am not easy to be wheedled."

"Faith," said Serge, "I won't deceive you. I will try to please you with all my heart."

Madame Desvarenes's face brightened as suddenly at these words as a landscape, wrapped in a fog, which is suddenly lighted up by the sun.

"Then we shall understand each other," she said. "For the last fortnight we have been busy with marriage preparations, and have not been able to think or reason. Everybody is rambling about here. Still, we are commencing a new life, and I think it is as well to lay the foundation. I seem to be drawing up a contract, eh? What can I do? It is an old business habit. I like to know how I stand."

"I think it is quite right. I think, too, that you have acted with great delicacy in not imposing your conditions upon me before giving your consent."

"Has that made you feel better disposed toward me? So much the better!" said the mistress. "Because you know that I depend on my daughter, who will henceforth depend on you, and it is to my interest that I should be in your good graces."

In pronouncing these words with forced cheerfulness, Madame Desvarenes's voice trembled slightly. She knew what an important game she was playing, and wished to win it at any price.

"You see," continued she, "I am not an easy woman to deal with. I am a little despotic, I know. I have been in the habit of commanding during the last thirty-five years. Business was heavy, and required a strong will. I had it, and the habit is formed. But this strong will, which has served me so well in business will, I am afraid, with you, play me some trick. Those who have lived with me a long time know that if I am

hot-headed I have a good heart. They submit to my tyranny; but you who are a newcomer, how will you like it?"

"I shall do as the others do," said Serge, simply. "I shall be led, and with pleasure. Think that I have lived for years without kindred, without ties--at random; and, believe me, any chain will be light and sweet which holds me to any one or anything. And then," frankly added he, changing his tone and looking at Madame Desvarences with tenderness, "if I did not do everything to please you I should be ungrateful."

"Oh!" cried Madame Desvarences, "unfortunately that is not a reason."

"Would you have a better one?" said the young man, in his most charming accent. "If I had not married your daughter for her own sake, I believe that I should have married her for yours." Madame Desvarences was quite pleased, and shaking her finger threateningly at Serge, said:

"Ah, you Pole, you boaster of the North!"

"Seriously," continued Serge, "before I knew I was to be your son-in-law, I thought you a matchless woman. Add to the admiration I had for your great qualities the affection which your goodness has inspired, and you will understand that I am both proud and happy to have such a mother as you."

Madame Desvarences looked at Panine attentively; she saw he was sincere. Then, taking courage, she touched the topic of greatest interest to her. "If that is the case, you will have no objections to live with me?" She stopped; then emphasized the words, "With me."

"But was not that understood?" asked Serge, gayly. "I thought so. You must have seen that I have not been seeking a dwelling for my wife and myself. If you had not made the offer to me, I should have asked you to let me stay with you."

Madame Desvarences broke into such an outburst of joy that she astonished Panine. It was then only that in that pallor, in that sudden trembling, in that changed voice, he understood, the immensity of the mother's love for her daughter.

"I have everything to gain by that arrangement," continued he. "My wife will be happy at not leaving you, and you will be pleased at my not having taken away your daughter. You will both like me better, and that is all I wish."

"How good you are in deciding thus, and how I thank you for it," resumed Madame Desvarences. "I feared you would have ideas of independence."

"I should have been happy to sacrifice them to you, but I have not even that merit."

All that Serge had said had been so open and plain, and expressed with such sweetness that, little by little, Madame Desvarences's prejudices

disappeared. He took possession of her as he had done of Micheline, and as he did of every one whom he wished to conquer. His charm was irresistible. He seized on one by the eyes and the ears. Naturally fascinating, moving, captivating, bold, he always preserved his artless and tender ways, which made him resemble a young girl.

"I am going to tell you how we shall manage," said the mistress.

"Foreseeing my daughter's marriage, I have had my house divided into two distinct establishments. They say that life in common with a mother-in-law is objectionable to a son-in-law, therefore I wish you to have a home of your own. I know that an old face like mine frightens young lovers. I will come to you when you invite me. But even when I am shut up in my own apartments I shall be with my daughter; I shall breathe the same air; I shall hear her going and coming, singing, laughing, and I shall say to myself, 'It is all right, she is happy.' That is all I ask. A little corner, whence I can share her life."

Serge took her hand with effusion.

"Don't be afraid; your daughter will not leave you."

Madame Desvarenes, unable to contain her feelings, opened her arms, and Serge fell on her breast, like a true son.

"Do you know, I am going to adore you!" cried Madame Desvarenes, showing Panine a face beaming with happiness.

"I hope so," said the young man, gayly.

Madame Desvarenes became thoughtful.

"What a strange thing life is!" resumed she. "I did not want you for a son-in-law, and now you are behaving so well toward me that I am full of remorse. Oh, I see now what a dangerous man you are, if you captivate other women's hearts as you have caught mine."

She looked at the Prince fixedly, and added, in her clear commanding voice, with a shade of gayety:

"Now, I hope you will reserve all your powers of charming for my daughter. No more flirting, eh? She loves you; she would be jealous, and you would get into hot water with me! Let Micheline's life be happy, without a cloud-blue, always blue sky!"

"That will be easy," said Serge. "To be unhappy I should have to seek misfortune; and I certainly shall not do that."

He began to laugh.

"Besides, your good friends who criticised so when you gave me Micheline's hand would be only too pleased. I will not give them the pleasure of posing as prophets and saying, 'We knew it would be so!'"

"You must forgive them," replied Madame Desvarenes. "You have made enemies. Without speaking of projects which I had formed, I may say that my daughter has had offers from the best folks in Paris; from first-rate firms! Our circle was rather indignant.

"People said: 'Oh, Madame Desvarenes wanted her daughter to be a Princess. We shall see how it will turn out. Her son-in-law will spend her money and spurn her.' The gossip of disappointed people. Give them the lie; manage that we shall all live together, and we shall be right against the world."

"Do you hope it will be so?"

"I am sure of it," answered the mistress, affectionately pressing the hand of her future son-in-law.

Micheline entered, anxious at the long interview between Serge and her mother. She saw them hand in hand. She uttered a joyful cry, and threw her arms caressingly round her mother's neck.

"Well! you are agreed?" she said, making a gracious sign to Serge.

"He has been charming," replied Madame Desvarenes, whispering in her daughter's ear. "He agrees to live in this house, and that quite gracefully. There, child, this is the happiest moment I've had since your engagement. I admit that I regret nothing."

Then, resuming aloud:

"We will leave to-morrow for Cernay, where the marriage shall take place. I shall have to order the workmen in here to get ready for your reception. Besides the wedding will be more brilliant in the country. We shall have all the work-people there. We will throw the park open to the countryside; it will be a grand fete. For we are lords of the manor there," added she, with pride.

"You are right, mamma; it will be far better," exclaimed Micheline. And taking Serge by the hand:

"Come, let us go," said she, and led him into the garden.

And amid the sweet-smelling shrubs they resumed their walk, always the same yet ever new, their arms twined round each other, the young girl clinging to him whom she loved, and he looking fondly at her, and with caressing voice telling her the oft-told tale of love which she was never tired of hearing, and which always filled her with thrills of joy.

CHAPTER IX

THE DOUBLE MARRIAGE

The Chateau of Cernay is a vast and beautiful structure of the time of Louis XIII. A walled park of a hundred acres surrounds it, with trees centuries old. A white painted gate separates the avenue from the road leading to Pontoise by way of Conflans. A carpet of grass, on which carriages roll as if on velvet, leads up to the park gates. Before reaching, it there is a stone bridge which spans the moat of running water. A lodge of stone, faced with brick, with large windows, rises at each corner of this space.

The chateau, surrounded by cleverly arranged trees, stands in the centre, on a solid foundation of red granite from the Jura. A splendid double staircase leads to the ground floor as high as an 'entresol'. A spacious hall, rising to the roof of the building, lighted by a window filled with old stained glass, first offers itself to the visitor. A large organ, by Cavallie-Col, rears its long brilliant pipes at one end of the hall to a level with the gallery of sculptured wood running round and forming a balcony on the first floor. At each corner is a knight in armor, helmet on head, and lance in hand, mounted on a charger, and covered with the heavy trappings of war. Cases full of objects of art of great value, bookshelves containing all the new books, are placed along the walls. A billiard-table and all sorts of games are lodged under the vast staircase. The broad bays which give admission to the reception-rooms and grand staircase are closed by tapestry of the fifteenth century, representing hunting scenes. Long cords of silk and gold loop back these marvellous hangings in the Italian style. Thick carpets, into which the feet sink, deaden the sound of footsteps. Spacious divans, covered with Oriental materials, are placed round the room.

Over the chimney-piece, which is splendidly carved in woodwork, is a looking-glass in the Renaissance style, with a bronze and silver frame, representing grinning fawns and dishevelled nymphs. Benches are placed round the hearth, which is large enough to hold six people. Above the divans, on the walls, are large oilpaintings by old masters. An "Assumption," by Jordaens, which is a masterpiece; "The Gamesters," by Valentin; "A Spanish Family on Horseback," painted by Velasquez; and the marvel of the collection--a "Holy Family," by Francia, bought in Russia. Then, lower down, "A Young Girl with a Canary," by Metz; a "Kermesse," by Braurver, a perfect treasure, glitter, like the gems they are, in the midst of panoplies, between the high branches of palm-trees planted in enormous delft vases. A mysterious light filters into that fresh and picturesque apartment through the stained-glass windows.

From the hall the left wing is reached, where the reception-rooms are, and one's eyes are dazzled by the brightness which reigns there. It is like coming out from a cathedral into broad daylight. The furniture, of gilt wood and Genoese velvet, looks very bright. The walls are white and gold; and flowers are everywhere. At the end is Madame Desvarenes's bedroom, because she does not like mounting stairs, and lives on the ground floor. Adjoining it is a conservatory, furnished as a drawing-room, and serving as a boudoir for the mistress of the house.

The dining-room, the gun-room, and the smoking-room are in the right

wing. The gun-room deserves a particular description. Four glass cases contain guns of every description and size of the best English and French manufacture. All the furniture is made of stags' horns, covered with fox-skins and wolf-skins. A large rug, formed by four bears' skins, with menacing snouts, showing their white teeth at the four corners, is in the centre of the room. On the walls are four paintings by Princeteau, admirably executed, and representing hunting scenes. Low couches, wide as beds, covered with gray cloth, invite the sportsmen to rest. Large dressing-rooms, fitted up with hot and cold water, invite them to refresh themselves with a bath. Everything has been done to suit the most fastidious taste. The kitchens are underground.

On the first story are the principal rooms. Twelve bedrooms, with dressing-rooms, upholstered in chintz of charming design. From these, a splendid view of the park and country beyond may be obtained. In the foreground is a piece of water, bathing, with its rapid current, the grassy banks which border the wood, while the low-lying branches of the trees dip into the flood, on which swans, dazzlingly white, swim in stately fashion. Beneath an old willow, whose drooping boughs form quite a vault of pale verdure, a squadron of multicolored boats remain fastened to the balustrade of a landing stage. Through an opening in the trees you see in the distance fields of yellow corn, and in the near background, behind a row of poplars, ever moving like a flash of silver lightning, the Oise flows on between its low banks.

This sumptuous dwelling, on the evening of the 14th of July, was in its greatest splendor. The trees of the park were lit up by brilliant Venetian lanterns; little boats glided on the water of the lake carrying musicians whose notes echoed through the air. Under a marquee, placed midway in the large avenue, the country lads and lasses were dancing with spirit, while the old people, more calm, were seated under the large trees enjoying the ample fare provided. A tremendous uproar of gayety reechoed through the night, and the sound of the cornet attracted the people to the ball.

It was nine o'clock. Carriages were fast arriving with guests for the mansion. In the centre of the handsome hall, illuminated with electric light, stood Madame Desvarenes in full dress, having put off black for one day, doing honor to the arrivals. Behind her stood Marechal and Savinien, like two aides-de-camp, ready, at a sign, to offer their arms to the ladies, to conduct them to the drawing-rooms. The gathering was numerous. Merchant-princes came for Madame Desvarenes's sake; bankers for Cayrol's; and the aristocrats and foreign nobility for the Prince's. An assemblage as opposed in ideas as in manners: some valuing only money, others high birth; all proud and elbowing each other with haughty assurance, speaking ill of each other and secretly jealous.

There were heirs of dethroned kings; princes without portions, who were called Highness, and who had not the income of their fathers' former chamberlains; millionaires sprung from nothing, who made a great show and who would have given half of their possessions for a single quartering of the arms of these great lords whom they affected to despise.

Serge and Cayrol went from group to group; the one with his graceful and delicate elegance; the other with his good-humor, radiant and elated by the consciousness of his triumphs. Herzog had just arrived, accompanied by his daughter, a charming girl of sixteen, to whom Marechal had offered his arm. A whispering was heard when Herzog passed. He was accustomed to the effect which he produced in public, and quite calmly congratulated Cayrol.

Serge had just introduced Micheline to Count Soutzko, a gray-haired old gentleman of military appearance, whose right sleeve was empty. He was a veteran of the Polish wars, and an old friend of Prince Panine's, at whose side he had received the wounds which had so frightfully mutilated him. Micheline, smiling, was listening to flattering tales which the old soldier was relating about Serge. Cayrol, who had got rid of Herzog, was looking for Jeanne, who had just disappeared in the direction of the terrace.

The rooms were uncomfortably warm, and many of the visitors had found their way to the terraces. Along the marble veranda, overlooking the lake, chairs had been placed. The ladies, wrapped in their lace scarfs, had formed into groups and were enjoying the delights of the beautiful evening. Bursts of subdued laughter came from behind fans, while the gentlemen talked in whispers. Above all this whispering was heard the distant sound of the cornet at the peasants' ball.

Leaning over the balustrade, in a shady corner, far from the noise which troubled him and far from the fete which hurt him, Pierre was dreaming. His eyes were fixed on the illuminations in the park, but he did not see them. He thought of his vanished hopes. Another was beloved by Micheline, and in a few hours he would take her away, triumphant and happy. A great sadness stole over the young man's spirit; he was disgusted with life and hated humanity. What was to become of him now? His life was shattered; a heart like his could not love twice, and Micheline's image was too deeply engraven on it for it ever to be effaced. Of what use was all the trouble he had taken to raise himself above others? A worthless fellow had passed that way and Micheline had yielded to him. Now it was all over!

And Pierre asked himself if he had not taken a wrong view of things, and if it was not the idle and good-for-nothing fellows who were more prudent than he. To waste his life in superhuman works, to tire his mind in seeking to solve great problems, and to attain old age without other satisfaction than unproductive honors and mercenary rewards. Those who only sought happiness and joy--epicureans who drive away all care, all pain, and only seek to soften their existence, and brighten their horizon--were they not true sages? Death comes so quickly! And it is with astonishment that one perceives when the hour is at hand, that one has not lived! Then the voice of pride spoke to him: what is a man who remains useless, and does not leave one trace of his passage through the world by works or discoveries? And, in a state of fever, Pierre said to himself:

"I will throw myself heart and soul into science; I will make my name

famous, and I will make that ungrateful child regret me. She will see the difference between me and him whom she has chosen. She will understand that he is nobody, except by her money, whereas she would have been all by me."

A hand was placed on his shoulder; and Marechal's affectionate voice said to him:

"Well! what are you doing here, gesticulating like that?"

Pierre turned round.

Lost in his thoughts he had not heard his friend approaching.

"All our guests have arrived," continued Marechal. "I have only just been able to leave them and to come to you. I have been seeking you for more than a quarter of an hour. You are wrong to hide yourself; people will make remarks. Come toward the house; it is as well to show yourself a little; people might imagine things which they must not imagine."

"Eh! let them think what they like; what does it matter to me?" said Pierre, sadly. "My life is a blank."

"Your life may be a blank; but it is your duty not to let any one perceive it. Imitate the young Spartan, who smiled although the fox, hidden under his cloak, was gnawing his vitals. Let us avoid ridicule, my friend. In society there is nothing that provokes laughter more than a disappointed lover, who rolls his eyes about and looks woe-begone. And, then, you-see, suffering is a human law; the world is an arena, life is a conflict. Material obstacles, moral griefs, all hinder and overwhelm us. We must go on, though, all the same, and fight. Those who give in are trodden down! Come, pull yourself together!"

"And for whom should I fight now? A moment ago I was making projects, but I was a fool! All hope and ambition are dead in me."

"Ambition will return, you may be sure! At present you are suffering from weariness of mind; but your strength will return. As to hope, one must never despair."

"What can I expect in the future?"

"What? Why, everything! In this world all sorts of things happen!" said Marechal, gayly. "Who is to prove that the Princess will not be a widow soon?"

Pierre could not help laughing and said,

"Come, don't talk such nonsense!"

"My dear fellow," concluded Marechal, "in life it is only nonsense that is common-sense. Come and smoke a cigar."

They traversed several groups of people and bent their steps in the direction of the chateau. The Prince was advancing toward the terrace, with an elegantly dressed and beautiful woman on his arm. Savinien, in the midst of a circle of dandies, was picking the passers-by to pieces in his easy-going way. Pierre and Marechal came behind these young men without being noticed.

"Who is that hanging on the arm of our dear Prince?" asked a little fat man, girt in a white satin waistcoat, and a spray of white lilac in his buttonhole.

"Eh! Why, Le Brede, my boy, you don't know anything!" cried Savinien in a bantering, jocosely tone.

"Because I don't know that lovely fair woman?" said Le Brede, in a piqued voice. "I don't profess to know the names of all the pretty women in Paris!"

"In Paris? That woman from Paris? You have not looked at her. Come, open your eyes. Pure English style, my friend."

The dandies roared with laughter. They had at once recognized the pure English style. They were not men to be deceived. One of them, a tall, dark fellow, named Du Tremblays, affected an aggrieved air, and said:

"Le Brede, my dear fellow, you make us blush for you!"

The Prince passed, smiling and speaking in a low voice to the beautiful Englishwoman, who was resting the tips of her white gloved fingers on her cavalier's arm.

"Who is she?" inquired Le Brede, impatiently.

"Eh, my dear fellow, it is Lady Harton, a cousin of the Prince. She is extremely rich, and owns a district in London."

"They say that a year ago she was very kind to Serge Panine," added Du Tremblays, confidentially.

"Why did he not marry her, then, since she is so rich? He has been quite a year in the market, the dear Prince."

"She is married."

"Oh, that is a good reason. But where is her husband?"

"Shut up in a castle in Scotland. Nobody ever sees him. He is out of his mind; and is surrounded by every attention."

"And a strait-waistcoat! Then why does not this pretty woman get a divorce?"

"The money belongs to the husband."

"Really!"

Pierre and Marechal had listened, in silence, to this cool and yet terrible conversation. The group of young men dispersed. The two friends looked at each other. Thus, then, Serge Panine was judged by his companions in pleasure, by the frequenters of the clubs in which he had spent a part of his existence. The Prince being "in the market" was obliged to marry a rich woman. He could not marry Lady Harton, so he had sought Micheline. And the sweet child was the wife of such a man! And what could be done? She loved him!

Madame Desvarenes and Micheline appeared on the terrace. Lady Harton pointed to the bride with her fan. The Prince, leaving his companion, advanced toward Micheline.

"One of my English relatives, a Polish lady, married to Lord Harton, wishes to be introduced to you," said Serge. "Are you agreeable?"

"With all my heart," replied the young wife, looking lovingly at her husband. "All who belong to you are dear to me, you know."

The beautiful Englishwoman approached slowly.

"The Princess Panine!" said Serge, gravely, introducing Micheline, who bowed gracefully. Then, with a shade of familiarity: "Lady Harton!" continued he, introducing his relative.

"I am very fond of your husband, Madame," said the Englishwoman. "I hope you will allow me to love you also; and I beg you to grant me the favor of accepting this small remembrance."

While speaking, she unfastened from her wrist a splendid bracelet with the inscription, *Semper*.

Serge frowned and looked stern. Micheline, lowering her eyes, and awed by the Englishwoman's grandeur, timidly said:

"I accept it, Madame, as a token of friendship."

"I think I recognize this bracelet, Madame," observed Serge.

"Yes; you gave it to me," replied Lady Harton, quietly. "*Semper*--I beg your pardon, Madame, we Poles all speak Latin--*Semper* means 'Always!' It is a great word. On your wife's arm this bracelet will be well placed. *Au revoir*, dear Prince. I wish you every happiness."

And bowing to Micheline with a regal bow, Lady Harton took the arm of a tall young man whom she had beckoned, and walked away.

Micheline, amazed, looked at the bracelet sparkling on her white wrist. Without uttering a word Serge unfastened it, took it off his wife's arm, and advancing on the terrace, with a rapid movement flung it in the

water. The bracelet gleamed in the night-air and made a brilliant splash; then the water resumed its tranquillity. Micheline, astonished, looked at Serge, who came toward her, and very humbly said:

"I beg your pardon."

The young wife did not answer, but her eyes filled with tears; a smile brightened her lips, and hurriedly taking his arm, she led him into the drawing-room.

Dancing was going on there. The young ladies of Pontoise, and the cream of Creil, had come to the fete, bent on not losing such an opportunity of enjoying themselves. Under the watchful eyes of their mothers, who, decked out in grand array, were seated along the walls, they were gambling, in spite of the stifling heat, with all the impetuosity of young provincials habitually deprived of the pleasures of the ballroom. Crossing the room, Micheline and Serge reached Madame Desvarenes's boudoir.

It was delightfully cool in there. Cayrol had taken refuge there with Jeanne, and Mademoiselle Susanne Herzog. This young girl felt uncomfortable at being a third party with the newly-married couple, and welcomed the arrival of the Prince and Micheline with pleasure. Her father had left her for a moment in Cayrol's care; but she had not seen him for more than an hour.

"Mademoiselle," said the Prince, gayly, "a little while ago, when I was passing through the rooms, I heard these words: 'Loan, discount, liquidation.' Your father must have been there. Shall I go and seek him?"

"I should be very grateful," said the young girl.

"I will go."

And turning lightly on his heels, happy to escape Jeanne's looks, Serge reentered the furnace. At once he saw Herzog seated in the corner of a bay-window with one of the principal stock-brokers of Paris. He was speaking. The Prince went straight up to him.

"Sorry to draw you away from the sweets of conversation," said he, smiling; "but your daughter is waiting for you, and is anxious at your not coming."

"Faith! My daughter, yes. I will come and see you tomorrow," said he to his companion. "We will talk over this association: there is much to be gained by it."

The other, a man with a bloated face, and fair Dundreary whiskers, was eager to do business with him. Certainly the affair was good.

"Oh, my dear Prince, I am happy to be alone with you for a moment!" said Herzog, with that familiarity which was one of his means of becoming

intimate with people. "I was going to compliment you! What a splendid position you have reached."

"Yes; I have married a charming woman," replied the Prince, coldly.

"And what a fortune!" insisted the financier. "Ah, it is worthy of the lot of a great lord such as you are! Oh, you are like those masterpieces of art which need a splendidly carved frame! Well, you have your frame, and well gilt too!"

He laughed and seemed pleased at Serge's happiness. He had taken one of his hands and was patting it softly between his own.

"Not a very 'convenient' mother-in-law, for instance," he went on, good-naturedly; "but you are so charming! Only you could have, coaxed Madame Desvarenes, and you have succeeded. Oh! she likes you, my dear Prince; she told me so only a little while ago. You have won her heart. I don't know how you manage it, but you are irresistible! By the way, I was not there when the marriage contract was read, and I, forgot to ask Cayrol. Under what conditions art you married?"

The Prince looked at Herzog with a look that was hardly friendly. But the financier appeared so indifferent, that Serge could not help answering him:

"My wife's fortune is settled on herself."

"Ah! ah! that is usual in Normandy!" replied Herzog with a grave look.

"I was told Madame Desvarenes was a clever woman and she has proved it. And you signed the contract with your eyes shut, my dear Prince. It is perfect, just as a gentleman should do!"

He said this with a good-natured air. Then, suddenly lifting his eyes, and with an ironical smile playing on his lips, he added:

"You are bowled out, my dear fellow, don't you know?"

"Sir!" protested Serge with haughtiness.

"Don't cry out; it is too late, and would be useless," replied the financier. "Let me explain your position to you. Your hands are tied. You cannot dispose of a sou belonging to your wife without her consent. It is true, you have influence over her, happily for you. Still you must foresee that she will be guided by her mother. A strong woman, too, the mother! Ah, Prince, you have allowed yourself to be done completely. I would not have thought it of you."

Serge, nonplussed for a moment, regained his self-possession, and looked Herzog in the face:

"I don't know what idea you have formed of me, sir, and I don't know what object you have in speaking thus to me."

"My interest in you," interrupted the financier. "You are a charming fellow: you please me much. With your tastes, it is possible that in a brief time you may be short of money. Come and see me: I will put you into the way of business. Au revoir, Prince."

And without giving Serge time to answer him, Herzog reached the boudoir where his daughter was waiting with impatience. Behind him came the Prince looking rather troubled. The financier's words had awakened importunate ideas in his mind. Was it true that he had been duped by Madame Desvarenes, and that the latter, while affecting airs of greatness and generosity, had tied him like a noodle to her daughter's apron-string? He made an effort to regain his serenity.

"Micheline loves me and all will be well," said he to himself.

Madame Desvarenes joined the young married people. The rooms were clearing by degrees. Serge took Cayrol apart.

"What are you going to do to-night, my dear fellow?"

"You know an apartment has been prepared for you here?"

"Yes, I have already thanked Madame Desvarenes, but I mean to go back to Paris. Our little paradise is prepared for us, and I wish to enter it to-night. I have my carriage and horses here. I am taking away my wife post-haste."

"That is an elopement," said Serge; gayly, "quite in the style of the regency!"

"Yes, my dear Prince, that's how we bankers do it," said Cayrol, laughing.

Then changing his tone:

"See, I vibrate, I am palpitating. I am hot and cold by turns. Just fancy, I have never loved before; my heart is whole, and I love to distraction!"

Serge instinctively glanced at Jeanne. She was seated, looking sad and tired.

Madame Desvarenes, between Jeanne and Micheline, had her arms twined round the two young girls. Regret filled her eyes. The mother felt that the last moments of her absolute reign were near, and she was contemplating with supreme adoration these two children who had grown up around her like two fragile and precious flowers. She was saying to them,

"Well, the great day is over. You are both married. You don't belong to me any longer. How I shall miss you! This morning I had two children, and now--"

"You have four," interrupted Micheline. "Why do you complain?"

"I don't complain," retorted Madame Desvarenes, quickly.

"That's right!" said Micheline, gayly.

Then going toward Jeanne:

"But you are not speaking, you are so quiet; are you ill?"

Jeanne shuddered, and made an effort to soften the hard lines on her face.

"It is nothing. A little fatigue."

"And emotion," added Micheline. "This morning when we entered the church, at the sound of the organ, in the midst of flowers, surrounded by all our friends, I felt that I was whiter than my veil. And the crossing to my place seemed so long, I thought I should never get there. I did so, though. And now everybody calls me 'Madame' and some call me 'Princess.' It amuses me!"

Serge had approached.

"But you are a Princess," said he, smiling, "and everybody must call you so."

"Oh, not mamma, nor Jeanne, nor you," said the young wife, quickly; "always call me Micheline. It will be less respectful, but it will be more tender."

Madame Desvarenes could not resist drawing her daughter once more to her heart.

"Dear child," she said with emotion, "you need affection, as flowers need the sun! But I love you, there."

She stopped and added:

"We love you."

And she held out her hand to her son-in-law. Then changing the subject:

"But I am thinking, Cayrol, as you are returning to Paris, you might take some orders for me which I will write out."

"What? Business? Even on my wedding-day?" exclaimed Micheline.

"Eh! my daughter, we must have flour," replied the mistress, laughing. "While we are enjoying ourselves Paris eats, and it has a famous appetite."

Micheline, leaving her mother, went to her husband.

"Serge, it is not yet late. Suppose we put in an appearance at the work-people's ball? I promised them, and the good folks will be so happy!"

"As you please. I am awaiting your orders. Let us make ourselves popular!"

Madame Desvarenes had gone to her room. Carol took the opportunity of telling his coachman to drive round by the park to the door of the little conservatory and wait there. Thus, his wife and he would avoid meeting any one, and would escape the leave-taking of friends and the curiosity of lockers-on.

Micheline went up to Jeanne, and said:

"As you are going away quietly, dear, I shall not see you again this evening. Adieu!"

And with a happy smile, she kissed her. Then taking her husband's arm she led him toward the park.

CHAPTER X

CAYROL'S DISAPPOINTMENT

Jeanne left alone, watched them as they disappeared with the light and easy movements of lovers.

Serge, bending toward Micheline, was speaking tenderly. A rush of bitter feeling caused Jeanne's heart to swell. She was alone, she, while he whom she loved-her whole being revolted. Unhappy one! Why did she think of this man? Had she the right to do so now? She no longer belonged to herself. Another, who was as kind to her as Serge was ungrateful, was her husband. She thought thus in sincerity of heart. She wished to love Cayrol. Alas, poor Jeanne! She would load him with attentions and caresses! And Serge would be jealous, for he could never have forgotten her so soon.

Her thoughts again turned to him whom she wished to forget. She made an effort, but in vain. Serge was uppermost; he possessed her. She was afraid. Would she never be able to break off the remembrance? Would his name be ever on her lips, his face ever before her eyes?

Thank heaven! she was about to leave. Travelling, and the sight of strange places other than those where she had lived near Serge, would draw her attention from the persecution she suffered. Her husband was about to take her away, to defend her. It was his duty, and she would help him with energy. With all the strength of her will she summoned Cayrol. She clung violently to him as a drowning person catches at a straw, with the vigor of despair.

There was between Jeanne and Cayrol a sympathetic communication. Mentally called by his wife, the husband appeared.

"Ah! at last!" said she.

Cayrol, surprised at this welcome, smiled. Jeanne, without noticing, added:

"Well, Monsieur; are we leaving soon?"

The banker's surprise increased. But as this surprise was decidedly an agreeable one he did not protest.

"In a moment, Jeanne, dear," he said.

"Why this delay?" asked the young wife, nervously.

"You will understand. There are more than twenty carriages before the front door. Our coachman is driving round, and we will go out by the conservatory door without being seen."

"Very well; we will wait."

This delay displeased Jeanne. In the ardor of her resolution, in the first warmth of her struggle, she wished at once to put space between her and Serge. Unfortunately, Cayrol had thwarted this effort of proud revolt. She was vexed with him. He, without knowing the motives which actuated his wife, guessed that something had displeased her. He wished to change the current of her thoughts.

"You were marvellously beautiful to-night," he said, approaching her gallantly. "You were much admired, and I was proud of you. If you had heard my friends! It was a concert of congratulations: What a fortunate fellow that Cayrol is! He is rich; he has a charming wife! You see, Jeanne, thanks to you, in the eyes of all, my happiness is complete."

Jeanne frowned, and without answering, shook her head haughtily. Cayrol continued, without noticing this forecast of a storm:

"They envy me; and I can understand it! I would not change places with anybody. There, our friend Prince Panine is very happy; he has married a woman whom he loves and who adores him. Well, he is not happier than I am!"

Jeanne rose abruptly, and gave her husband a terrible look.

"Monsieur!" she cried with rage.

"I beg your pardon," said Cayrol, humbly; "I appear ridiculous to you, but my happiness is stronger than I am, and I cannot hide my joy. You will see that I can be grateful. I will spend my life in trying to please you. I have a surprise for you to begin with."

"What kind of surprise?" asked Jeanne, with indifference.

Cayrol rubbed his hands with a mysterious air. He was enjoying beforehand the pleasant surprise he had in store for his wife.

"You think we are going to Paris to spend our honeymoon like ordinary folk?"

Jeanne started. Cayrol seemed unfortunate in his choice of words.

"Well, not at all," continued the banker. "Tomorrow I leave my offices. My customers may say what they like; I will leave my business, and we are off."

Jeanne showed signs of pleasure. A flash of joy lit up her face. To go away, that was rest for her!

"And where shall we go?"

"That is the surprise! You know that the Prince and his wife intend travelling!"

"Yes; but they refused to say where they were going;" interrupted Jeanne, with a troubled expression.

"Not to me. They are going to Switzerland. Well, we shall join them there."

Jeanne arose like a startled deer when it hears the sound of a gun.

"Join them there!" she exclaimed.

"Yes; to continue the journey together. A party of four; two newly-married couples. It will be charming. I spoke to Serge on the subject. He objected at first, but the Princess came to my assistance. And when he saw that his wife and I were agreed, he commenced to laugh, and said: 'You wish it? I consent. Don't say anything more!' It is all very well to talk of love's solitude; in about a fortnight, passed tete-a-tete, Serge will be glad to have us. We will go to Italy to see the lakes; and there, in a boat, all four, of us will have such pleasant times."

Cayrol might have gone on talking for an hour, but Jeanne was not listening. She was thinking. Thus all the efforts which she had decided to make to escape from him whom she loved would be useless. An invincible fatality ever brought her toward him whom she was seeking to avoid. And it was her husband who was aiding this inevitable and execrable meeting. A bitter smile played on her lips. There was something mournfully comic in this stubbornness of Cayrol's, in throwing her in the way of Serge.

Cayrol, embarrassed by Jeanne's silence, waited a moment.

"What is the matter?" he asked. "You are just like the Prince when I spoke to him on the subject."

Jeanne turned away abruptly. Cayrol's comparison was too direct. His blunders were becoming wearisome.

The banker, quite discomfited on seeing the effect of his words, continued:

"You object to this journey? If so, I am willing to give it up."

The young wife was touched by this humble servility.

"Well, yes," she said, softly, "I should be grateful to you."

"I had hoped to please you," said Cayrol. "It is for me to beg pardon for having succeeded so badly. Let us remain in Paris. It does not matter to me what place we are in! Being near to you is all I desire."

He approached her, and, with beaming eyes, added:

"You are so beautiful, Jeanne; and I have loved you so long a time!"

She moved away, full of a vague dread. Cayrol, very excitedly, put her cloak round her shoulders, and looking toward the door, added:

"The carriage is there, we can go now."

Jeanne, much troubled, did not rise.

"Wait another minute," said she.

Cayrol smiled constrainedly:

"A little while ago you were hurrying me off."

It was true. But a sudden change had come over Jeanne. Her energy had given way. She felt very weary. The idea of going away with Cayrol, and of being alone with him in the carriage frightened her. She looked vaguely at her husband, and saw, in a sort of mist, this great fat man, with a protruding shirt-front, rolls of red flesh on his neck above his collar, long fat ears which only needed gold ear-rings, and his great hairy hands, on the finger of one of which shone the new wedding-ring. Then, in a rapid vision, she beheld the refined profile, the beautiful blue eyes, and the long, fair mustache of Serge. A profound sadness came over the young woman, and tears rushed to her eyes.

"What is the matter with you? You are crying!" exclaimed Cayrol, anxiously.

"It is nothing; my nerves are shaken. I am thinking of this chateau which bears my name. Here I spent my youth, and here my father died. A thousand ties bind me to this dwelling, and I cannot leave it without

being overcome."

"Another home awaits you, luxuriantly adorned," murmured Cayrol, "and worthy of receiving you. It is there you will live henceforth with me, happy through me, and belonging to me."

Then, ardently supplicating her, he added:

"Let us go, Jeanne!"

He tried to take her in his arms, but the young wife disengaged herself.

"Leave me alone!" she said, moving away.

Cayrol looked at her in amazement.

"What is it? You are trembling and frightened!"

He tried to jest:

"Am I so very terrible, then? Or is it the idea of leaving here that troubles you so much? If so, why did you not tell me sooner? I can understand things. Let us remain here for a few days, or as long as you like. I have arranged my affairs so as to be at liberty. Our little paradise can wait for us."

He spoke pleasantly, but with an undercurrent of anxiety.

Jeanne came slowly to him, and calmly taking his hand, said:

"You are very good."

"I am not making any efforts to be so," retorted Cayrol, smiling. "What do I ask? That you may be happy and satisfied."

"Well, do you wish to please me?" asked the young wife.

"Yes!" exclaimed Cayrol, warmly, "tell me how."

"Madame Desvarences will be very lonely tomorrow when her daughter will be gone. She will need consoling--"

"Ah, ah," said Cayrol, thinking that he understood, "and you would like--"

"I would like to remain some time with her. You could come every day and see us. I would be very grateful to you, and would love you very much!"

"But--but--but--!" exclaimed Cayrol, much confounded, "you cannot mean what you say, Jeanne! What, my dear? You wish me to return alone to Paris to-night? What would my servants say? You would expose me to ridicule!"

Poor Cayrol made a piteous face. Jeanne looked at him as she had never looked before. It made his blood boil.

"Would you be so very ridiculous for having been delicate and tender?"

"I don't see what tenderness has to do with it," cried Cayrol; "on the contrary! But I love you. You don't seem to think it!"

"Prove it," replied Jeanne, more provokingly.

This time Cayrol lost all patience.

"Is it in leaving you that I shall prove it? Really, Jeanne, I am disposed to be kind and to humor your whims, but on condition that they are reasonable. You seem to be making fun of me! If I give way on such important points on the day of our marriage, whither will you lead me? No; no! You are my wife. The wife must follow her husband; the law says so!"

"Is it by law only that you wish to keep me? Have you forgotten what I told you when you made me an offer of marriage? It is my hand only which I give you."

"And I answered you, that it would be my aim to gain your heart. Well, but give me the means. Come, dear," said the banker in a resolute tone, "you take me for a child. I am not so simple as that! I know what this resistance means; charming modesty so long as it is not everlasting."

Jeanne turned away without answering. Her face had changed its expression; it was hard and determined.

"Really," continued Cayrol, "you would make a saint lose patience. Come, answer me, what does this attitude mean?"

The young wife remained silent. She felt she could not argue any longer, and seeing no way out of her trouble, felt quite discouraged. Still she would not yield. She shuddered at the very idea of belonging to this man; she had never thought of the issue of this brutal and vulgar adventure. Now that she realized it, she felt terribly disgusted.

Cayrol anxiously watched the increasing anguish depicted on his wife's face. He had a presentiment that she was hiding something from him, and the thought nearly choked him. And, with this suspicion, his ingenuity came to his aid. He approached Jeanne, and said, affectionately:

"Come, dear child, we are misleading one another; I in speaking too harshly, you in refusing to understand me. Forget that I am your husband; see in me only a friend and open your heart; your resistance hides a mystery. You have had some grief or have been deceived."

Jeanne, softened, said, in a low tone:

"Don't speak to me like that; leave me."

"No," resumed Cayrol, quietly, "we are beginning life; there must be no misunderstanding. Be frank, and you will find me indulgent. Come, young girls are often romantic. They picture an ideal; they fall in love with some one who does not return their love, which is sometimes even unknown to him who is their hero. Then, suddenly, they have to return to a reality. They find themselves face to face with a husband who is not the expected Romeo, but who is a good man, devoted, loving, and ready to heal the wounds he has not made. They are afraid of this husband; they mistrust him, and will not follow him. It is wrong, because it is near him, in honorable and right existence, that they find peace and forgetfulness."

Cayrol's heart was torn by anxiety, and with trembling voice he tried to read the effect of his words on Jeanne's features. She had turned away. Cayrol bent toward her and said:

"You don't answer me."

And as she still remained silent, he took her hand and forced her to look at him. He saw that her face was covered with tears. He shuddered, and then flew into a terrible passion.

"You are crying! It is true then? You have loved?"

Jeanne rose with a bound; she saw her imprudence. She understood the trap he had laid; her cheeks burned. Drying her tears, she turned toward Cayrol, and cried:

"Who has said so?"

"You cannot deceive me," replied the banker, violently. "I saw it in your looks. Now, I want to know the man's name!"

Jeanne looked him straight in the face.

"Never!" she said.

"Ah, that is an avowal!" exclaimed Cayrol.

"You have deceived me unworthily by your pretended kindness," interrupted Jeanne, proudly, "I will not say anything more."

Cayrol flew at her--the churl reappeared. He muttered a fearful oath, and seizing her by the arm, shouted:

"Take care! Don't play with me. Speak, I insist, or--" and he shook her brutally.

Jeanne, indignant, screamed and tore herself away from him.

"Leave me," she said, "you fill me with horror!"

The husband, beside himself, pale as death and trembling convulsively, could not utter a word, and was about to rush upon her when the door opened, and Madame Desvarences appeared, holding in her hand the letters which she had written for Cayrol to take back to Paris. Jeanne uttered a cry of joy, and with a bound threw herself into the arms of her who had been a mother to her.

CHAPTER XI

CONFESSION

Madame Desvarences understood the situation at a glance. She beheld Cayrol livid, tottering, and excited. She felt Jeanne trembling on her breast; she saw something serious had occurred. She calmed herself and put on a cold manner to enable her the better to suppress any resistance that they might offer.

"What is the matter?" she asked, looking severely at Cayrol.

"Something quite unexpected," replied the banker, laughing nervously.

"Madame refuses to follow me."

"And for what reason?" she asked.

"She dare not speak!" Cayrol resumed, whose excitement increased as he spoke. "It appears she has in her heart an unhappy love! And as I do not resemble the dreamed-of type, Madame has repugnances. But you understand the affair is not going to end there. It is not usual to come and say to a husband, twelve hours after marriage, 'Sir, I am very sorry, but I love somebody else!' It would be too convenient. I shall not lend myself to these whims."

"Cayrol, oblige me by speaking in a lower tone," said Madame Desvarences, quietly. "There is some misunderstanding between you and this child."

The husband shrugged his broad shoulders.

"A misunderstanding? Faith! I think so! You have a delicacy of language which pleases me! A misunderstanding! Say rather a shameful deception! But I want to know the gentleman's name. She will have to speak. I am not a scented, educated gentleman. I am a peasant, and if I have to--"

"Enough," said Madame Desvarences, sharply tapping with the tips of her fingers Cayrol's great fist which he held menacingly like a butcher about to strike. Then, taking him quietly aside toward the window, she added:

"You are a fool to go on like this! Go to my room for a moment. To you, now, she will not say anything; to me she will confide all and we shall

know what to do."

Cayrol's face brightened.

"You are right," he said. "Yes, as ever, you are right. You must excuse me, I do not know how to talk to women. Rebuke her and put a little sense in her head. But don't leave her; she is fit to commit any folly."

Madame Desvarences smiled.

"Be easy," she answered.

And making a sign to Cayrol, who was leaving the room, she returned to Jeanne.

"Come, my child, compose yourself. We are alone and you will tell me what happened. Among women we understand each other. Come, you were frightened, eh?"

Jeanne was one petrified, immovable, and dumb, she fixed her eyes on a flower which was hanging from a vase. This red flower fascinated her. She could not take her eyes off it. Within her a persistent thought recurred: that of her irremediable misfortune. Madame Desvarences looked at her for a moment; then, gently touching her shoulder, resumed;

"Won't you answer me? Have you not confidence in me? Have I not brought you up? And if you are not born of me, have not the tenderness and care I have lavished upon you made me your real mother?"

Jeanne did not answer, but her eyes filled with tears;

"You know that I love you," continued the mistress. "Come, come to my arms as you used to do when you were little and were suffering. Place your head thereon my heart and let your tears flow. I see they are choking you."

Jeanne could no longer resist, and falling on her knees beside Madame Desvarences, she buried her face in the silky and scented folds of her dress like a frightened bird that flies to the nest and hides itself under the wings of its mother.

This great and hopeless grief was to the mistress a certain proof that Cayrol was right. Jeanne had loved and still loved another man than her husband. But why had she not said anything, and why had she allowed herself to be married to the banker? She had resisted, she remembered now. She had struggled, and the refusals they had put down to pride they must now attribute to passion.

She did not wish to be separated from him whom she loved. Hence the struggle that had ended in her abandoning her hand to Cayrol, perhaps in a moment of despair and discouragement. But why had he whom she loved not married her? What obstacle had arisen between him and the young girl? Jeanne, so beautiful, and dowered by Madame Desvarences, who then

could have hesitated to ask her hand?

Perhaps he whom Jeanne loved was unworthy of her? No! She would not have chosen him. Perhaps he was not free to marry? Yes, it must be that. Some married man, perhaps! A scoundrel who did not mind breaking a young girl's heart! Where had she met him? In society at her house in the Rue Saint-Dominique, perhaps! Who could tell? He very likely still continued to come there. At the thought Madame Desvarences grew angry. She wished to know the name of the man so that she might have an explanation with him, and tell him what she thought of his base conduct. The gentleman should have respectable, well-educated girls to trifle with, should he? And he risked nothing! He should be shown to the door with all honors due to his shameful conduct.

Jeanne was still weeping silently at Madame Desvarences's knee. The latter raised her head gently and wiped away the tears with her lace pocket-handkerchief.

"Come, my child! all this deluge means nothing. You must make up your mind. I can understand your hiding anything from your husband, but not from me! What is your lover's name?"

This question so simply put, threw a faint light on Jeanne's troubled brain. She saw the danger she was running. To speak before Madame Desvarences! To tell the name of him who had been false to her! To her! Was it possible? In a moment she understood that she was about to destroy Micheline and Serge. Her conscience revolted and she would not. She raised herself and looking at Madame Desvarences with still frightened eyes,

"For pity's sake, forget my tears! Don't believe what my husband has told you. Never seek to know. Remain ignorant as you are on the subject!"

"Then he whom you love is related to me, as: you wish to hide his name even from me," said Madame Desvarences with instinctive anguish.

She was silent. Her eyes became fixed. They looked without seeing. She was thinking.

"I beseech you," cried Jeanne, madly placing her hands before Madame Desvarences's face as if to check her scrutiny.

"If I had a son," continued the mistress, "I would believe--" Suddenly she ceased speaking; she became pale, and bending toward Jeanne, she looked into her very soul.

"Is it--"she began.

"No! no!" interrupted Jeanne, terrified at seeing that the mistress had found out the truth.

"You deny it before I have pronounced the name?" said Madame Desvarences

in a loud voice. "You read it then on my lips? Unhappy girl! The man whom you love is the husband of my daughter!"

My daughter! The accent with which Madame Desvarences pronounced the word "my" was full of tragical power. It revealed the mother capable of doing anything to defend the happiness of the child whom she adored. Serge had calculated well. Between Jeanne and Micheline, Madame Desvarences would not hesitate. She would have allowed the world to crumble away to make of its ruins a shelter where her daughter would be joyous and happy.

Jeanne had fallen back overwhelmed. The mistress raised her roughly. She had no more consideration for her. It was necessary that she should speak. Jeanne was the sole witness, and if the truth had to be got by main force she should be made to speak it.

"Ah, forgive me!" moaned the young girl.

"It is not a question of that! In one word, answer me: Does he love you?"

"Do I know?"

"Did he tell you he did?"

"Yes."

"And he has married Micheline!" exclaimed Madame Desvarences, with a fearful gesture. "I distrusted him. Why did I not obey my instinct?"

And she began walking about like a lioness in a cage. Then, suddenly stopping and placing herself before Jeanne, she continued:

"You must help me to save Micheline!"

She thought only of her own flesh and blood. Without hesitation, unconsciously, she abandoned the other--the child of adoption. She claimed the safety of her daughter as a debt.

"What has she to fear?" asked Jeanne, bitterly. "She triumphs, as she is his wife."

"If he were to abandon her," said the mother with anguish. Then, reflecting: "Still, he has sworn to me that he loved her."

"He lied!" cried Jeanne, with rage. "He wanted Micheline for her fortune!"

"But why that?" inquired Madame Desvarences, menacingly. "Is she not pretty enough to have pleased him? Do you think that you are the only one to be loved?"

"If I had been rich he would have married me!", replied Jeanne,

exasperated.

She had risen in revolt. They were treading too heavily on her. With a ferocious cry of triumph; she added:

"The night he used his influence with me to get me to marry Cayrol, he assured me so on his word of honor!"

"Honor!" ironically repeated Madame Desvarenes, overwhelmed. "How he has deceived us all! But what can I do? What course can I take? A separation? Micheline would not consent. She loves him."

And, in an outburst of fury, she cried:

"Is it possible that that stupid girl loves that worthless dandy? And she has my blood in her veins! If she knew the truth she would die!"

"Am I dead?" asked Jeanne, gloomily.

"You have an energetic nature," retorted the mistress, compassionately; "but she is so weak, so gentle! Ah! Jeanne, think what I have been to you; raise some insurmountable barrier between yourself and Serge!

"Go back to your husband. You would not go with him a little while ago. It was folly. If you separate from Cayrol, you will not be able to keep away Serge, and you will take my daughter's husband from her!"

"Ah! you think only of her! Her, always! She above all!" cried Jeanne, with rage. "But me, I exist, I count, I have the right to be protected, of being happy! And you wish me to sacrifice myself, to give myself up to this man, whom I do not love, and who terrifies me?"

This time the question was plainly put. Madame Desvarenes became herself. She straightened her figure, and in her commanding voice whose authority no one resisted, said:

"What then? You wish to be separated from him? To regain your liberty at the price of scandal? And what liberty? You will be repulsed, disdained. Believe me, impose silence on your heart and listen to your reason. Your husband is a good, loyal man. If you cannot love him, he will command your respect. In marrying him, you have entered into engagements toward him. Fulfil them; it is your duty."

Jeanne felt overpowered and vanquished. "But what will my life be?" she groaned.

"That of an honest woman," replied Madame Desvarenes, with true grandeur. "Be a wife; God will make you a mother, and you will be saved."

Jeanne bowed herself at these words. She no longer felt in them the selfishness of the mother. What the mistress now said was sincere and true. It was no longer her agitated and alarmed heart that inspired her;

it was her conscience, calm and sincere.

"Very well; I will obey you," said the young wife, simply. "Kiss me then, mother."

She bent her brow, and Madame Desvarences let tears of gratitude and admiration fall on it. Then Jeanne went of her own accord to the room door.

"Come, Monsieur," called she to Cayrol.

The husband, grown cooler while waiting, and troubled at the length of the interview, showed his anxious face on the threshold. He saw Madame Desvarences grave, and Jeanne collected. He dared not speak.

"Cayrol, everything is explained," said the mistress. "You have nothing to fear from him whom you suspected. He is separated from Jeanne forever, And; besides, nothing has passed between him and her who is your wife that could arouse your jealousy. I will not tell you the name of this man now. But if perchance he by some impossibility reappeared and threatened your happiness, I would myself--you understand, me?--point him out to you!"

Cayrol remained thinking for a moment; then addressing Madame Desvarences, replied:

"It is well. I have confidence in you."

Then turning toward Jeanne, he added:

"Forgive me and let everything be forgotten."

The mistress's face beamed with joy, as she followed their departing figures with her eyes, and murmured:

"Brave hearts!"

Then, changing her expression:

"Now for the other one!" exclaimed she.

And she went out on to the terrace.

CHAPTER XII

THE FETE

The air was mild, the night clear and bright. Cayrol's carriage rolled rapidly along the broad avenue of the park shadowed by tall trees, the lanterns throwing, as they passed, their quivering light on the thickets.

The rumbling carriages took the last guests to the railway station. It was past midnight. A nightingale began singing his song of love to the stars.

Madame Desvarenes mechanically stopped to listen. A sense of sorrow came over this mother who was a prey to the most cruel mental anguish. She thought that she could have been very happy on that splendid night, if her heart had been full of quietude and serenity. Her two daughters were married; her last task was accomplished. She ought to have nothing to do but enjoy life after her own fashioning, and be calm and satisfied. Instead of that, here were fear and dissimulation taking possession of her mind; and an ardent, pitiless struggle beginning against the man who had deceived her daughter and lied to her. The bark which carried her fortune, on reaching port, had caught fire, and it was necessary to begin laboring again amid cares and pains.

A dull rage filled her heart. To have so surely built up the edifice of her happiness, to have embellished it every hour, and then to see an intruder audaciously taking possession of it, and making his despotic and hateful authority prevail! And what could she do against this new master? Nothing. He was marvellously protected by Micheline's mad love for him. To strike Serge would be to wound Micheline, surely and mortally. So this scoundrel could laugh at her and dare her with impunity!

What must she do? Take him aside and tell him that she knew of his disloyal conduct, and tell him of her contempt and hatred for him? And after that? What would be the consequence of this outburst of violence? The Prince, using his power over Micheline, would separate the daughter from the mother. And Madame Desvarenes would be alone in her corner, abandoned like a poor dog, and would die of despair and anger. What other course then? She must dissemble, mask her face with indifference, if possible with tenderness, and undertake the difficult task of separating Micheline from the man whom she adored. It was quite a feat of strategy to plan. To bring out the husband's faults and to make his errors known, and give her the opportunity of proving his worthlessness. In a word, to make the young wife understand that she had married an elegant manikin, unworthy of her love.

It would be an easy matter to lay snares for Serge. He was a gambler. She could let him have ready money to satisfy his passion. Once in the clutches of the demon of play, he would neglect his wife, and the mother might regain a portion of the ground she had lost. Micheline's fortune once broken into, she would interpose between her daughter and son-in-law. She would make him pull up, and holding him tightly by her purse strings, would lead him whither she liked.

Already in fancy she saw her authority regained, and her daughter, her treasure, her life, true mistress of the situation, grateful to her for having saved her. And then, she thought, a baby will come, and if Micheline is really my daughter, she will adore the little thing, and the blind love which she has given to her husband will be diminished by so much.

Serge did not know what an adversary he had against him in his mother-in-law. It was a bad thing to cross the mistress when business matters were concerned, but now that her daughter's happiness was at stake! A smile came to her lips. A firm resolution from that hour must guide her, and the struggle between her son-in-law and herself could only end by the crushing of one of them.

In the distance the music from the work-people's ball was heard. Madame Desvarenes mechanically bent her steps toward the tent under which the heavy bounds of the dancers reechoed. Every now and then large shadows appeared on the canvas. A joyful clamor issued from the ballroom. Loud laughter resounded, mingled with piercing cries of tickled women.

The voice of the master of the ceremonies could be heard jocose and solemn: "La poule! Advance! Set to partners!" Then the stamping of heavy shoes on the badly planed floor, and, above all, the melancholy sounds of the clarinet and the shrill notes of the cornet were audible.

At the entrance of the ballroom, surrounded by tables and stools, two barrels of wine on stands presented their wooden taps, ready for those who wanted to quench their thirst. A large red mark under each barrel showed that the hands of the drinkers were no longer steady. A cake-seller had taken up his place at the other side, and was kneading a last batch of paste, while his apprentice was ringing a bell which hung over the iron cooking-stove to attract customers. There was an odor of rancid butter, spilled wine, and paraffin oil.

Adjoining the ballroom, a merry-go-round; which had been the delight of the village urchins all day, appealed for custom by the aid of a barrel-organ on which a woman in a white bodice was playing the waltz from 'Les Cloches de Corneville'.

The animation of this fete, in the midst of which Madame Desvarenes suddenly appeared, was a happy diversion from the serious thoughts which beset her. She remembered that Serge and Micheline must be there. She came from under the shadow of the avenue into the full light. On recognizing her, all the workpeople, who were seated, rose. She was really mistress and lady of the place. And then she had fed these people since morning. With a sign she bade them be seated, and walking quickly toward the dancing-room, lifted the red and white cotton curtain which hung over the entrance.

There, in a space of a hundred square yards or so, about a hundred and fifty people were sitting or standing. At the end, on a stage, were the musicians, each with a bottle of wine at his feet, from which they refreshed themselves during the intervals. An impalpable dust, raised by the feet of the dancers, filled the air charged with acrid odors. The women in light dresses and bareheaded, and the men arrayed in their Sunday clothes, gave themselves up with frantic ardor to their favorite pleasure.

Ranged in double rows, vis-a-vis, they were waiting with impatience for

the music to strike up for the last figure. Near the orchestra, Serge was dancing with the Mayor's daughter opposite Micheline, whose partner was the mayor himself. An air of joyful gravity lit up the municipal officer's face. He was enjoying the honor which the Princess had done him. His pretty young daughter, dressed, in her confirmation dress, which had been lengthened with a muslin flounce, a rose in her hair, and her hands encased in straw-colored one-button kid gloves, hardly dared raise her eyes to the Prince, and with burning cheeks, answered in monosyllables the few remarks Serge felt forced to address to her.

The orchestra bellowed, the floor shook; the two lines of dancers had advanced in a body. Madame Desvarenes, leaning against the door-post, followed with her eyes her daughter, whose light footsteps contrasted strangely with the heavy tread of the women around her. The mayor, eager and respectful, followed her, making efforts to keep up with her without treading on her long train. It was,

"Excuse me, Madame la Princesse. If Madame la Princesse will do me the honor to give me her hand, it is our turn to cross."

They had just crossed. Serge suddenly found himself facing his mother-in-law. His face lit up, and he uttered a joyful exclamation. Micheline raised her eyes, and following her husband's look, perceived her mother. Then it was a double joy. With a mischievous wink, Serge called Madame Desvarenes's attention to the mayor's solemn appearance as he was galloping with Micheline, also the comical positions of the rustics.

Micheline was smiling. She was enjoying herself. All this homely gayety, of which she was the cause, made her feel happy. She enjoyed the pleasure of those around her. With her compassionate eyes she thanked her mother in the distance for having prepared this fete in honor of her marriage. The clarinet, violin, and cornet sounded a last modulation, then the final cadence put an end to the bounds of the dances. Each took his lady to her place--the mayor with pompous gait, Serge with as much grace as if he had been at an ambassador's ball and was leading a young lady of highest rank.

Madame Desvarenes was suddenly surrounded; cheers resounded, the band struck up the Marseillaise.

"Let us escape," said Serge, "because these good people will think nothing of carrying us in triumph."

And leading away his mother-in-law and his wife, he left the ballroom followed by cheers.

Outside they all three walked in silence. The night air was delightful after coming out of that furnace. The cheering had ceased, and the orchestra was playing a polka. Micheline had taken her husband's arm.

They went along slowly, and close together. Not a word was exchanged; they all three seemed to be listening within themselves. When they reached the house, they went up the steps leading into the greenhouse,

which served also as a boudoir to Madame Desvarences.

The atmosphere was still warm and scented, the lamps still burning. The guests had left; Micheline looked round. The remembrance of this happy evening, which had been the crowning of her happiness, filled her heart with emotion. Turning toward her mother with a radiant face, she cried:

"Ah! mamma! I am so happy," and threw her arms around her.

Serge started at this cry. Two tears came to his eyes, and looking a little pale, he stretched out to Madame Desvarences his hands, which she felt trembling in hers, and said:

"Thank you."

Madame Desvarences gazed at him for a moment. She did not see the shadow of a wicked thought on his brow. He was sincerely affected, truly grateful. The idea occurred to her that Jeanne had deceived her, or had deceived herself, and that Serge had not loved her. A feeling of relief took possession of her. But distrust had unfortunately entered her mind. She put away that flattering hope. And giving her son-in-law such a look, which, had he been less moved, he would have understood, she murmured,

"We shall see."

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

A uniform is the only garb which can hide poverty honorably
Forget a dream and accept a reality
I don't pay myself with words
Implacable self-interest which is the law of the world
In life it is only nonsense that is common-sense
Is a man ever poor when he has two arms?
Is it by law only that you wish to keep me?
Nothing that provokes laughter more than a disappointed lover
Suffering is a human law; the world is an arena
The uncontested power which money brings
We had taken the dream of a day for eternal happiness
What is a man who remains useless

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