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Title: Gerfaut, v4

Author: Charles de Bernard

Release Date: April, 2003 [Etext #3984]
[Yes, we are about one year ahead of schedule]
[The actual date this file first posted = 09/25/01]

Edition: 10

Language: English

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GERFAUT

By CHARLES DE BERNARD

BOOK 4.

CHAPTER XX

MARILLAC TELLS A STORY

Guests were seated that evening around the oval table in the dining-room of the castle of Bergenheim. According to custom, the ladies were not present at this repast. This was a custom which had been adopted by the Baroness for the suppers which were given by her husband at the close of his hunting parties; she dispensed with appearing at table on those days; perhaps she was too fastidious to preside at these lengthy seances of which the ruses of the hare, the death of the stag, and the feats of the hounds, formed the principal topics of conversation. It is probable that this conduct was duly appreciated by those who participated in those rather boisterous repasts, and that they felt a certain gratitude, in spite of the regrets they manifested on account of Madame's absence.

Among the guests was Marillac, whose sparkling eye, and cheeks even more rosy than usual, made him conspicuous. Seated between a fat notary and another boon companion, who were almost as drunk as he Marillac emptied glass after glass, red wine after the white, the white after the red, with noisy laughter, and jests of all kinds by way of accompaniment. His head became every moment more and more excited by the libations destined to refresh his throat, and his neighbors, without his perceiving the conspiracy, thought it would be good fun to put a Parisian dandy under the table. However, he was not the only one who was gliding over the slippery precipice that leads to the attractive abyss of drunkenness. The majority of the guests shared his imprudent abandon and progressive exaltation. A bacchic emulation reigned, which threatened to end in scenes bordering upon a debauch.

Among these highly colored cheeks, under which the wine seemed to circulate with the blood, these eyes shining with a dull, fictitious light, all this disorderly pantomime so contrary to the quiet habit of the gesticulators, two faces contrasted strangely with the careless mirth of the others. The Baron fulfilled his duties as master of the house with a sort of nervous excitement which might pass for genuine merriment in the eyes of those of his guests who were in no condition to study his countenance; but a quiet observer would soon have discerned that these violent efforts at good-humor and bantering concealed some terrible suffering. From time to time, in the midst of a sentence or a laugh, he would suddenly stop, the muscles of his face would twitch as if the spring which set them in motion had broken; his expression became sombre and savage; he sank back in his chair motionless, a stranger to all that surrounded him, and gave himself up to some mysterious thought against which resistance seemed powerless. Suddenly he appeared to wake from some perplexing dream, and by another powerful effort aroused himself and joined in the conversation with sharp, cutting speeches; he encouraged the noisy humor of his guests, inciting them to drunkenness by setting the example himself; then the same mysterious thought would cross his face anew, and he would fall back into the tortures of a reverie which must have been horrible, to judge by the expression of his face.

Among his guests, one only, who was seated almost opposite Bergenheim, seemed to be in the secret of his thoughts and to study the symptoms with deep attention. Gerfaut, for it was he, showed an interest in this examination which reacted on his own countenance, for he was paler than ever.

"When I saw that the hare was reaching the upper road," said one of the guests, a handsome old man about sixty years of age, with gray hair and rosy cheeks, "I ran toward the new clearing to wait for its return. I felt perfectly sure, notary, that he would pass through your hands safe and sound."

"Now, notary," said Marillac, from the other end of the table, "defend yourself; one, two, three, ready!"

"Monsieur de Camier," replied the hunter whose skill had been questioned, "I do not pretend to have your skill. I never have shot as large game as you did at your last hunt."

This reply was an allusion to a little misadventure which had happened to the first speaker, who, on account of nearsightedness, had shot a cow, taking it for a buck. The laugh, which had been at the notary's expense first, now turned against his adversary.

"How many pairs of boots did you get out of your game?" asked one.

"Gentlemen, let us return to our conversation," said a young man, whose precise face aspired to an austere and imposing air. "Up to this time, we can form only very vague conjectures as to the road that Lambernier took to escape. This, allow me to say, is more important than the notary's hare or Monsieur de Carrier's cow."

At these words, Bergenheim, who had taken no part in the conversation, straightened up in his chair.

"A glass of Sauterne," said he, suddenly, to one of his neighbors.

Gerfaut looked at him stealthily for a moment, and then lowered his eyes, as if he feared his glance might be noticed.

"The public prosecutor scents a culprit, and there is no fear he will drop the trail," said the notary.

"The case will doubtless come up at the next session of the Assizes."

M. de Carrier put his glass, which was half filled, upon the table, angrily exclaiming:

"The devil take the jury! I am called to the next session, and I will wager my head that I shall be drawn. How agreeable that will be! To leave my home and business in the middle of winter and spend a fortnight with a lot of fellows whom I do not know from Adam! That is one of the agreeable things supplied by constitutional government. The French have to be judged by their peers! Of what use is it to pay for judges if we, land-owners, are obliged to do their work. The old parliaments, against which so much has been said, were a thousand times better than all this bedlam let loose in a court of assizes."

Marillac, who during this speech was amusing himself with singing his low "G" while peeling an apple, interrupted his song, to the great relief of a hound who lay at his feet, and whose nerves seemed to be singularly affected by the strain.

"Monsieur de Carrier," said he, "you are a large landowner, an eligible citizen and a Carlist; you fast on Fridays, go to mass in your parish, and occasionally kill cows for bucks; I esteem and respect you; but allow me to say that you have just uttered an old, antediluvian platitude."

"Gentlemen," said the public prosecutor, punctuating each word with his first finger, "I have the greatest respect for the old parliaments, those worthy models of our modern magistracy, those incorruptible defenders of national freedom, but my veneration is none the less great for the institutions emanating from our wise constitution, and it prevents me from adopting an exclusive opinion. However, without pretending to proclaim in too absolute a manner the superiority of the old system over the new, I am in a certain sense of Monsieur de Carrier's opinion. In my position, I am better able than any other person to study the advantages and disadvantages of a jury, and I am forced to admit that if the advantages are real, the disadvantages are none the less indisputable. One of the great vices of juries consists in the habit that a great number of its members have of calling for material proofs in order to form their opinions. They must almost see the wounds of the victim before agreeing on a verdict. As to Lambernier, I hope that they will not contest the existence of the main evidence: the victim's still

bleeding thigh."

"Tra-de-ri-di-ra," exclaimed the artist, striking alternately with his knife a glass and a bottle, as if he were playing a triangle. "I must say that you choose madly gay subjects for conversation. We are truly a joyous crowd; look at Bergenheim opposite us; he looks like Macbeth in the presence of Banquo's ghost; here is my friend Gerfaut drinking water with a profoundly solemn air. Good gracious, gentlemen! enough of this foolish talk! Let them cut this Lambernier's throat and put an end to the subject! The theatre for dramatic music, the church for sacred!

Le vin, le jeu; les belles,
Voila mes seuls amours."

A general protestation rose from the whole table at this verse, which was roared out in a lugubrious voice. Noisy shouts, rapping of knives upon tumblers and bottles, and exclamations of all kinds called the orator to order.

"Monsieur Marillac," exclaimed the public prosecutor, in a joking tone, "it seems to me that you have wandered from the subject."

The artist looked at him with an astonished air.

"Had I anything in particular to say to you?" he asked; "if so, I will sustain my point. Only do me the kindness to tell me what it was about."

"It was on the subject of this man Lambernier," whispered the notary to him, as he poured out a glass of wine. "Courage! you improvise better than Berryer! If you exert yourself, the public prosecutor will be beaten in no time."

Marillac thanked his neighbor with a smile and a nod of the head, which signified: "Trust me." He then emptied his glass with the recklessness that had characterized his drinking for some time, but, strangely enough, the libation, instead of putting the finishing stroke to his drunkenness, gave his mind, for the time being, a sort of lucidity.

"The accusation," he continued, with the coolness of an old lawyer, "rests upon two grounds: first, the presence without cause of the accused upon the spot where the crime was committed; second, the nature of the weapon used.--Two simple but peremptory replies will make the scaffold which has been erected upon this double supposition fall to the ground. First, Lambernier had a rendezvous at this place, and at the exact hour when this crime with which he is accused took place; this will be proved by a witness, and will be established by evidence in a most indisputable manner. His presence will thus be explained without its being interpreted in any way against him. Second, the public prosecutor has admitted that the carrying of a weapon which Lambernier may have been in the habit of using in his regular trade could not be used as an argument against him, and for that same reason could not be used as an argument in favor of premeditation; now, this is precisely the case in question. This weapon was neither a sword, bayonet, nor stiletto, nothing that the

fertile imagination of the public prosecutor could imagine; it was a simple tool used by the accused in his profession, the presence of which in his pocket is as easily understood as that of a snuff-box in the pocket of my neighbor, the notary, who takes twenty pinches of snuff a minute. Gentlemen, this weapon was a pair of carpenter's compasses."

"A compass!" exclaimed several voices at once.

"A compass!" exclaimed the Baron, gazing fixedly at the artist. Then he carried his hand to his pocket, and suddenly withdrew it, as he felt the workman's compass there, where it had been ever since the scene upon the rocks.

"An iron compass," repeated the artist, "about ten inches long, more or less, the legs of it being closed."

"Will you explain yourself, Monsieur?" excitedly exclaimed the public prosecutor, "for it really seems as if you had witnessed the crime. In that case you will be called out as a witness for the defence. Justice is impartial, gentlemen. Justice has not two pairs of scales."

"To the devil with justice! You must have come from Timbuctoo to use such old-fashioned metaphors."

"Make your deposition, witness; I require you to make your deposition," said the magistrate, whose increasing drunkenness appeared as dignified and solemn as the artist was noisy.

"I have nothing to state; I saw nothing."

Here the Baron drew a long breath, as if these words were a relief.

"But I saw something!" said Gerfaut to himself, as he gazed at the Baron's face, upon which anxiety was depicted.

"I reason by hypothesis and supposition," continued the artist. "I had a little altercation with Lambernier a few days ago, and, but for my good poniard, he would have put an end to me as he did to this fellow to-day."

He then related his meeting with Lambernier, but the consideration due Mademoiselle Gobillot's honor imposed numberless circumlocutions and concealments which ended by making his story rather unintelligible to his auditors, and in the midst of it his head became so muddled that he was completely put out.

"Basta!" he exclaimed, in conclusion, as he dropped heavily into his chair. "Not another word for the 'whole empire. Give me something to drink! Notary, you are the only man here who has any regard for me. One thing is certain about this matter--I am in ten louis by this rascal's adventure."

These words struck the Baron forcibly, as they brought to his mind what the carpenter had said to him when he gave him the letter.

"Ten louis!" said he, suddenly, looking at Marillac as if he wished to look into his very heart.

"Two hundred francs, if you like it better. A genuine bargain. But we have talked enough, 'mio caro'; you deceive yourselves if you think you are going to make me blab. No, indeed! I am not the one to allow myself to become entangled. I am now as mute and silent as the grave."

Bergenheim insisted no longer, but, leaning against the back of his chair, he let his head fall upon his breast. He remained for some time buried in thought and vainly trying to connect the obscure words he had just heard with Lambernier's incomplete revelations. With the exception of Gerfaut, who did not lose one of his host's movements, the guests, more or less absorbed by their own sensations, paid no attention to the strange attitude of the master of the house, or, like Monsieur de Camier, attributed it to the influence of wine. The conversation continued its noisy course, interrupted every few moments by the startling vagaries of some guest more animatedly excited than the rest, for, at the end of a repast where sobriety has not reigned, each one is disposed to impose upon others the despotism of his own intoxication, and the idle talk of his peculiar hallucinations. Marillac bore away the prize among the talking contingent, thanks to the vigor of his lungs and the originality of his words, which sometimes forced the attention of his adversaries. Finally he remained master of the field, and flashed volleys of his drunken eloquence to the right and left.

"It is a pity," he exclaimed, in the midst of his triumph, as he glanced disdainfully up and down the table, "it really is a pity, gentlemen, to listen to your conversation. One could imagine nothing more commonplace-prosaic or bourgeois. Would it not please you to indulge in a discussion of a little higher order?"

Let us join hands, and talk of poetry and art. I am thirsting for an artistic conversation; I am thirsting for wit and intelligence."

"You must drink if you are thirsty," said the notary, filling his glass to the brim.

The artist emptied it at one draught, and continued in a languishing voice as he gazed with a loving look at his fat neighbor.

"I will begin our artistic conversation: 'Knowest thou the land where the orange-flower blooms?'"

"It is warmer than ours," replied the notary, who was not familiar with Mignon's song; and, beginning to laugh maliciously, he gave a wink at his neighbors as if to say:

"I have settled him now."

Marillac leaned toward him with the meekness of a lamb that presents his head to the butcher, and sympathetically pressed his hands.

"O poet!" he continued, "do you not feel, as I do at the twilight hour and in the eventide, a vague desire for a sunny, perfumed, southern life? Will you not bid adieu to this sterile country and sail away to a land where the blue sky is reflected in the blue sea? Venice! the Rialto, the Bridge of Sighs, Saint Mark! Rome! the Coliseum and Saint Peter-- But I know Italy by heart; let us go instead to Constantinople. I am thirsting for sultanas and houris; I am thirsting--"

"Good gracious! why do you not drink if you are thirsty?"

"Gladly. I never say no to that. I scorn love in a nightcap; I adore danger. Danger is life to me.

I dote on silken ladders as long as Jacob's, on citadels worth scaling; on moonlight evenings, bearded husbands, and all that sort of thing--I would love a bed composed of five hundred poniards; you understand me, poet--"

"I beg of you, do not make him drink any more," said Gerfaut to the notary.

"You are right not to wish to drink any more, Octave, I was about to advise you not to. You have already drunk to excess to-day, and I am afraid that it will make you ill; your health is so weak--you are not a strong man like me. Fancy, gentlemen, Monsieur le Vicomte de Gerfaut, a native of Gascony, a roue by profession, a star of the first magnitude in literature, is afflicted by nature with a stomach which has nothing in common with that of an ostrich; he has need to use the greatest care. So we have him drink seltzer-water principally, and feed him on the white meat of the chicken. Besides, we keep this precious phenomenon rolled up between two wool blankets and over a kettle of boiling water. He is a great poet; I myself am a very great poet."

"And I also, I hope," said the notary.

"Gentlemen, formerly there were poets who wrote only in verse; nowadays they revel in prose. There are some even who are neither prose nor verse writers, who have never confided their secret to anybody, and who selfishly keep their poetry to themselves. It is a very simple thing to be a poet, provided you feel the indescribable intoxication of the soul, and understand the inexpressible afflatus that bubbles over in your large brain, and your noble heart throbs under your left breast--"

"He is as drunk as a fool," said M. de Camier, loud enough for him to hear.

"Old man," said he, "you are the one who is drunk. Besides the word drunk is not civil; if you had said intoxicated I should not have objected."

Loud shouts of laughter burst forth from the party. He threw a threatening glance around him, as if he were seeking some one upon whom

to vent his anger, and, placing his hand upon his hip, assumed the pose of a bully.

"Softly, my good fellows!" said he, "if any of you pretend that I am drunk, I declare to him that he lies, and I call him a misanthrope, a vagabond, an academician!" he concluded, with a loud burst of laughter; for he thought that the jesters would be crushed by this last heavy weapon.

"By Jove! your friend is hilariously drunk," said the notary to Gerfaut; "while here is Bergenheim, who has not taken very much wine, and yet looks as if he were assisting at a funeral. I thought he was more substantial than this."

Marillac's voice burst out more loudly than ever, and Octave's reply was not heard.

"It is simply astounding. They are all as drunk as fools, and yet they pretend that it is I who am drunk. Very well! I defy you all; who among you wishes to argue with me? Will you discuss art, literature, politics, medicine, music, philosophy, archeology, jurisprudence, magnetism--"

"Jurisprudence!" exclaimed the thick voice of the public prosecutor, who was aroused from his stupor by this magic word; "let us talk jurisprudence."

"Would you like," said Marillac, without stopping at this interruption, "that I should improvise a discourse upon the death penalty or upon temperance? Would you like me to tell you a story?"

"A story, yes, a story!" they all exclaimed in unison.

"Speak out, then; order what story you like; it will cost you nothing," replied the artist, rubbing his hands with a radiant air. "Would you like a tale from the Middle Ages? a fairy, an eastern, a comical, or a private story? I warn you that the latter style is less old-fashioned than the others."

"Let us have it, then, by all means," said all the drunken voices.

"Very well. Now would you like it to be laid in Spain, Arabia, or France?"

"France!" exclaimed the prosecutor.

"I am French, you are French, he is French. You shall have a French story."

Marillac leaned his forehead upon his hands, and his elbows upon the table, as if to gather his scattered ideas. After a few moments' reflection, he raised his head and looked first at Gerfaut, then at Bergenheim, with a peculiar smile.

"It would be very original," said he, in a low voice as if replying to his own thoughts.

"The story!" exclaimed one of the party, more impatient than the rest.

"Here it is," replied the artist. "You all know, gentlemen, how difficult it always is to choose a title. In order not to make you wait, I have chosen one which is already well known. My story is to be called 'The husband, the wife, and the lover.' We are not all single men here, and a wise proverb says that one must never speak--"

In spite of his muddled brain, the artist did not finish his quotation. A remnant of common-sense made him realize that he was treading upon dangerous ground and was upon the point of committing an unpardonable indiscretion. Fortunately, the Baron had paid no attention to his words; but Gerfaut was frightened at his friend's jabbering, and threw him a glance of the most threatening advice to be prudent. Marillac vaguely understood his mistake, and was half intimidated by this glance; he leaned before the notary and said to him, in a voice which he tried to make confidential, but which could be heard from one end of the table to the other:

"Be calm, Octave, I will tell it in obscure words and in such a way that he will not see anything in it. It is a scene for a drama that I have in my mind."

"You will make some grotesque blunder, if you go on drinking and talking," replied Gerfaut, in an anxious voice. "Hold your tongue, or else come away from the table with me."

"When I tell you that I will use obscure words," replied the artist; "what do you take me for? I swear to you that I will gloss it over in such a way that nobody will suspect anything."

"The story! the story!" exclaimed several, who were amused by the incoherent chattering of the artist.

"Here it is," said the latter, sitting upright in his chair, and paying no heed to his friend's warnings. "The scene takes place in a little court in Germany--Eh!" said he, looking at Gerfaut and maliciously winking his eye--"do you not think that is glossed over?"

"Not in a German court, you said it was to be a French story," said the public prosecutor, disposed to play the critic toward the orator who had reduced him to silence.

"Well, it is a French story, but the scene is laid in Germany," he replied, coolly. "Do you desire to teach me my profession? Understand that nothing is more elastic than a German court; the story-teller can introduce there whoever he likes; I may bring in the Shah of Persia and the Emperor of China if I care to. However, if you prefer the court of Italy, it is the same thing to me."

This conciliating proposal remained without response. Marillac continued raising his eyes in such a way that nothing but the whites could be seen, and as if he were searching for his words in the ceiling.

"The Princess Borinski was walking slowly in the mysterious alley on the borders of the foaming torrent "

"Borinski! she is a Pole, then?" interrupted M. de Camier.

"Oh! go to the devil, old man! Do not interrupt me," exclaimed the artist, impatiently.

"That is right. Silence now."

"You have the floor," said several voices at once.

"--She was pale, and she heaved convulsive sighs and wrung her soft, warm hands, and a white pearl rolled from her dark lashes, and--"

"Why do you begin all your phrases with 'and?'" asked the public prosecutor, with the captiousness of an inexorable critic.

"Because it is biblical and unaffected. Now let me alone," replied Marillac, with superb disdain. "You are a police-officer; I am an artist; what is there in common between you and me? I will continue: And he saw this pensive, weeping woman pass in the distance, and he said to the Prince: 'Borinski, a bit of root in which my foot caught has hurt my limb, will you suffer me to return to the palace? And the Prince Borinski said to him, 'Shall my men carry you in a palanquin?' and the cunning Octave replied--"

"Your story has not even common-sense and you are a terrible bore," interrupted Gerfaut brusquely. "Gentlemen, are we going to sit at the table all night?"

He arose, but nobody followed his example. Bergenheim, who for the last few minutes had lent an attentive ear to the artist's story, gazed alternately at the two friends with an observing eye.

"Let him talk," said the young magistrate, with an ironical smile.

"I like the palanquin in the court of Germany. That is probably what novelists call local color. O Racine, poor, deserted Racine!"

Marillac was not intimidated this time by Gerfaut's withering glance, but, with the obstinacy of drunkenness, continued in a more or less stammering voice:

"I swore that I would gloss it over; you annoy me. I committed an error, gentlemen, in calling the lover in this story Octave. It is as clear as day that his name is Boleslas, Boleslas Matalowski. There is no more connection between him and my friend Octave than there is between my other friend Bergenheim and the prince Kolinski--Woginski--what the devil has become of my Prince's name? A good reward to whoever will tell me

his name!"

"It is wrong to take advantage of his condition and make him talk any more," said Gerfaut. "I beg of you, Marillac, hold your tongue and come with me," said he, lowering his voice as he leaned toward the headstrong story-teller and took him by the arm, trying to make him rise. This attempt only irritated Marillac; he seized hold of the edge of the table and clung to it with all his might, screaming:

"No! a thousand times no! I will finish my story. President, allow me to speak. Ah! ha! you wish to prevent me from speaking because you know that I tell a story better than you, and that I make an impression upon my audience. You never have been able to catch my chic. Jealous! Envious! I know you, serpent!"

"I beg of you, if you ever cared for me, listen!" replied Octave, who, as he bent over his friend, noticed the Baron's attentive look.

"No, I say no!" shouted the artist again, and he added to this word one of the ugliest-sounding oaths in the French language. He arose, and pushing Octave aside, leaned upon the table, bursting into a loud laugh. "Poets all," said he, "be reassured and rejoice. You shall have your story, in spite of those envious serpents. But first give me something to drink, for my throat is like a box of matches. No wine," he added, as he saw the notary armed with a bottle. "This devilish wine has made me thirsty instead of refreshing me; besides, I am going to be as sober as a judge."

Gerfaut, with the desperation of a man who sees that he is about to be ruined, seized him again by the arm and tried to fascinate him by his steady gaze. But he obtained no response to this mute and threatening supplication except a stupid smile and these stammering words:

"Give me something to drink, Boleslas--Marinski-Graboski--I believe that Satan has lighted his heating apparatus within my stomach."

The persons seated near the two friends heard an angry hiss from Gerfaut's lips. He suddenly leaned over, and taking, from among several bottles, a little carafe he filled Marillac's glass to the brim.

"Thanks," said the latter, trying to stand erect upon his legs; "you are an angel. Rest easy, your love affairs will run no risk. I will gloss it all over--To your health, gentlemen!"

He emptied the glass and put it upon the table; he then smiled and waved his hand at his auditors with true royal courtesy; but his mouth remained half open as if his lips were petrified, his eyes grew large and assumed a haggard expression; the hand he had stretched out fell to his side; a second more, and he reeled and fell from his chair as if he had had a stroke of apoplexy.

Gerfaut, whose eyes had not left him, watched these different symptoms with unutterable anxiety; but in spite of his fright, he drew a sigh of

relief when he saw Marillac mute and speechless.

"It is singular," observed the notary, as he aided in removing his neighbor from the table, "that glass of water had more effect upon him than four or five bottles of wine."

"Georges," said Gerfaut to one of the servants, in an agitated voice, "open his bed and help me carry him to it; Monsieur de Bergenheim, I suppose there is a chemist near here, if I should need any medicine."

The greater part of the guests arose at this unexpected incident, and some of them hastened to Marillac's side, as he remained motionless in his chair. The repeated bathing of his temples with cold water and the holding of salts to his nose were not able to bring him to consciousness.

Instead of going to his aid with the others, Bergenheim profited by the general confusion to lean over the table. He plunged his finger into the artist's glass, in which a part of the water remained, and then touched his tongue. Only the notary noticed this movement. Thinking this rather strange, he seized the glass in his turn and swallowed the few drops that it contained.

"Heavens!" he exclaimed, in a low voice, to Bergenheim, "I am not surprised that the bumper asphyxiated him on the spot. Do you know, Baron, if this Monsieur de Gerfaut had taken anything but water during the evening, I should say that he was the drunker of the two; or that, if they were not such good friends, he wished to poison him in order to stop his talk. Did you notice that he did not seem pleased to hear this story?"

"Ah! you, too!" exclaimed the Baron angrily, "everybody will know it."

"To take a carafe of kirsch for clear water," continued the notary, without paying any attention to the Baron's agitation. "The devil! the safe thing to do is to give him an emetic at once; this poor fellow has enough prussic acid in his stomach to poison a cow."

"Who is talking of prussic acid and poisoning?" exclaimed the public prosecutor, running with an unsteady step from one extremity of the table to the other, "who has been poisoned? I am the public prosecutor, I am the only one here who has any power to start an investigation. Have they had an autopsy? Where did they find it? Buried in the fields or the woods, or floating on the river?"

"You lie! there is no dead body in the river!" exclaimed Bergenheim, in a thundering voice, as he seized the magistrate by the collar in a bewildered way.

The magistrate was incapable of making the least resistance when held by such a vigorous hand and he received two or three shakings. Suddenly the Baron stopped, and struck his forehead with a gesture common to persons who feel that their reason has given way under a paroxysm of rage.

"I am crazy," said he, with much emotion. "Monsieur," he added, "I am very sorry. We really have all taken too much wine. I beg your pardon, gentlemen. I will leave you a moment--I need some fresh air."

He hurriedly left the room, almost running against the persons who were carrying Marillac to his room. The public prosecutor, whose ideas had been somewhat mixed before, was now completely muddled by this unheard-of attack upon his dignity, and fell back exhausted in his chair.

"All poor drinkers!" said the notary to Monsieur de Carrier who was left alone with him, for the prosecutor, half suffocated with indignation and intoxication, could no longer be counted as one of them. "Here they are, all drunk, from just a few glasses of wine."

The notary shook his head with a mysterious air.

"These things, though, are plain enough to me," said he at last; "first, this Monsieur Marillac has not a very strong head and tells pretty tedious stories when drunk; then his friend has a way of taking kirsch for water which I can understand only in extreme cases; but the Baron is the one who astonished me most. Did you notice how he shook our friend who has just fallen on the floor? As to the Baron pretending that he was drunk and thus excusing himself, I do not believe one word of it; he drank nothing but water. There were times this evening when he appeared very strange indeed! There is some devilry underneath all this; Monsieur de Carrier, rest assured there is some devilry underneath it all."

"I am the public prosecutor--they can not remove the body without me," stammered the weak voice of the magistrate, who, after trying in vain to recover his equilibrium, lay flat upon the floor.

CHAPTER XXI

A STRATAGEM

Instead of joining the persons who were carrying Marillac away, Christian went into the garden after leaving the dining-room, in quest of the fresh air which he gave as an excuse for leaving his guests. In fact, he felt oppressed almost to suffocation by the emotions he had undergone during the last few hours. The dissimulation which prudence made a necessity and honor a duty had aggravated the suffering by protracted concealment.

For some time Christian walked rapidly among the paths and trees in the park. Bathing his burning brow in the cool night air, he sought to calm the secret agitation and the boiling blood that were raging within him, in the midst of which his reason struggled and fought like a ship about to be wrecked. He used all his strength to recover his self-possession, so as to be able to master the perils and troubles which surrounded him with a calm if not indifferent eye; in one word, to regain that control

over himself that he had lost several times during the supper. His efforts were not in vain. He contemplated his situation without weakness, exaggeration, or anger, as if it concerned another. Two facts rose foremost before him, one accomplished, the other uncertain. On one side, murder, on the other, adultery. No human power could remedy the first or prevent its consequences; he accepted it, then, but turn his mind away from it he must, in the presence of this greater disaster. So far, only presumptions existed against Clemence--grave ones, to be sure, if one added Lambernier's revelations to Marillac's strangely indiscreet remarks. It was his first duty to himself, as well as to her, to know the whole truth; if innocent, he would beg her forgiveness; if guilty, he had a chastisement to inflict.

"It is an abyss," thought he, "and I may find as much blood as mud at the bottom of it. No matter, I will descend to its very depths."

When he returned to the chateau, his face had resumed its usual calm expression. The most observing person would hardly have noticed any change in his looks. The dining-room had been abandoned at last. The victorious and the vanquished had retired to their rooms. First of all, he went up to the artist's apartment, so that no singularity in his conduct should attract attention, for, as master of the house, a visit to one of his guests who had fallen dead, or nearly so, at his own table was a positive duty. The attentions lavished upon Marillac by his friend had removed the danger which might have resulted from his imprudent excesses in drinking, and the sort of poisoning with which he had crowned the whole. He lay upon his bed in the same position in which he had first been placed, and was sleeping that heavy, painful sleep which serves as an expiation for bacchic excesses. Gerfaut was seated a few steps from him, at a table, writing; he seemed prepared to sit up all night, and to fulfill, with the devotion of a friend, the duties of a nurse.

Octave arose at sight of the Baron, his face having resumed its habitual reserved expression. The two men greeted each other with equal composure.

"Is he sleeping?" asked Christian.

"But a few minutes only," replied the latter; "he is all right now, and I hope," Octave added, smilingly, "that this will serve as a lesson to you, and that hereafter you will put some limits to your princely hospitality. Your table is a regular ambush."

"Do not throw stones at me, I pray," replied the Baron, with an appearance of equal good-humor. "If your friend wants to ask an explanation of anybody it is of you, for you took some kirsch of 1765 for water."

"I really believe that I was the drunker of the two," interrupted Octave, with a vivacity which concealed a certain embarrassment; "we must have terribly scandalized Monsieur de Camier, who has but a poor opinion of Parisian heads and stomachs."

After looking for a moment at the sleeping artist, Christian approached the table where Gerfaut was seated, and threw a glance over the latter's writing.

"You are still at work, I see?" said he, as his eyes rested upon the paper.

"Just now I am following the modest trade of copyist. These are some verses which Mademoiselle de Corandeuil asked me for--"

"Will you do me a favor? I am going to her room now; give me these verses to hand to her. Since the misfortune that befell Constance, she has been terribly angry with me, and I shall not be sorry to have some reason for going to her room."

Octave finished the two or three lines which remained to be copied, and handed the sheet to Bergenheim. The latter looked at it attentively, then carefully folded it and put it in his pocket.

"I thank you, Monsieur," said he, "I will leave you to your friendly duties."

There was something so solemn in the calm accent of these words, and the polite bow which accompanied them, that Gerfaut felt chilled, though not alarmed, for he did not understand.

When he reached his room, Bergenheim opened the paper which Gerfaut had just given him and compared it with the letter he had received from Lambernier. The suspicions which a separate examination had aroused were confirmed upon comparing the two letters; no doubt was possible; the letter and the poetry were written by the same hand!

After a few moments' reflection, Christian went to his wife's room.

Clemence was seated in an armchair, near the fireplace, indulging in a reverie. Although her lover was not there, she was still under the charm of this consuming as well as intellectual passion, which responded to the yearnings of her heart, the delicacy of her tastes, and the activity of her imagination. At this moment, she was happy to live; there was not a sad thought that these words, "He loves me!" could not efface.

The noise of the opening door aroused her from her meditation. Madame de Bergenheim turned her head with a look of vexation, but instead of the servant whom she was ready to reprimand, she saw her husband. The expression of impatience imprinted upon her face gave way to one of fright. She arose with a movement she could not repress, as if she had seen a stranger, and stood leaning against the mantel in a constrained attitude. Nothing in Christian's manner justified, however, the fear the sight of him seemed to cause his wife. He advanced with a tranquil air, and a smile that he had forced upon his lips.

With the presence of mind with which all women seem to be gifted, Clemence fell back into her chair, and, assuming a languid, suffering

tone, mixed with an appearance of reproach, she said:

"I am glad to see you for a moment in order to scold you; you have not shown your usual consideration to-night. Did you not think that the noise from the dining-room might reach as far as here?"

"Has it troubled you?" asked Christian, looking at her attentively.

"Unless one had a head of cast-iron--It seems that these gentlemen have abused the liberty permitted in the country. From what Justine tells me, things have taken place which would have been more appropriate at the *Femme-sans-Tete*."

"Are you suffering very much?"

"A frightful neuralgia--I only wish I could sleep."

"I was wrong not to have thought of this. You will forgive me, will you not?"

Bergenheim leaned over the chair, passed his arm around the young woman's shoulders, and pressed his lips to her forehead. For the first time in his life, he was playing a part upon the marital stage, and he watched with the closest attention the slightest expression of his wife's face. He noticed that she shivered, and that her forehead which he had lightly touched was as cold as marble.

He arose and took several turns about the room, avoiding even a glance at her, for the aversion which she had just shown toward her husband seemed to him positive proof of the very thing he dreaded, and he feared he should not be able to contain himself.

"What is the matter with you?" she asked, as she noticed his agitation.

These words brought the Baron to his senses, and he returned to her side, replying in a careless tone:

"I am annoyed for a very simple cause; it concerns your aunt."

"I know. She is furious against you on account of the double misfortune to her dog and coachman. You will admit that, as far as Constance is concerned, you are guilty."

"She is not content with being furious; she threatens a complete rupture. Here, read this."

He handed her a large letter, folded lengthwise and sealed with the *Corandeuil* crest.

Madame de Bergenheim took the letter and read its contents aloud:

"After the unheard-of and unqualifiable events of this day, the resolution which I have formed will doubtless not surprise you in

the least, Monsieur. You will understand that I can not and will not remain longer in a house where the lives of my servants and other creatures which are dear to me may be exposed to the most deplorable, wilful injury. I have seen for some time, although I have tried to close my eyes to the light of truth, the plots that were hatched daily against all who wore the Corandeuil livery. I supposed that I should not be obliged to put an end to this highly unpleasant matter myself, but that you would undertake this charge. It seems, however, that respect and regard for women do not form part of a gentleman's duties nowadays. I shall therefore be obliged to make up myself for the absence of such attentions, and watch over the safety of the persons and other creatures that belong to me. I shall leave for Paris tomorrow. I hope that Constance's condition will permit her to endure the journey, but Baptiste's wound is too serious for me to dare to expose him. I am compelled, although with deep regret, to leave him here until he is able to travel, trusting him to the kind mercies of my niece.

"Receive, Monsieur, with my adieux, my thanks for your courteous hospitality.

"YOLANDE DE CORANDEUIL."

"Your aunt abuses the privileges of being foolish," said the Baron, when his wife had finished reading the letter; "she deserts the battlefield and leaves behind her wounded."

"But I saw her, not two hours ago, and, although she was very angry, she did not say one word of this departure."

"Jean handed me this letter but a moment ago, clad in full livery, and with the importance of an ambassador who demands his passports. You must go and talk with her, dear, and use all your eloquence to make her change her mind."

"I will go at once," said Clemence, rising.

"You know that your aunt is rather obstinate when she takes a notion into her head. If she persists in this, tell her, in order to decide her to remain, that I am obliged to go to Epinal with Monsieur de Carrier tomorrow morning, on account of the sale of some wood-land, and that I shall be absent three days at least. You understand that it will be difficult for your aunt to leave you alone during my absence, on account of these gentlemen."

"Certainly, that could not be," said she, quickly.

"I do not see, as far as I am concerned, anything improper about it," said the Baron, trying to smile; "but we must obey the proprieties. You are too young and too pretty a mistress of the house to pass for a chaperon, and Aline, instead of being a help, would be one inconvenience the more. So your aunt must stay here until my return."

"And by that time Constance and Baptiste will be both cured and her anger will have passed away. You did not tell me about this trip to Epinal nor the selling of the woodland."

"Go to your aunt's room before she retires to bed," replied Bergenheim, without paying any attention to this remark, and seating himself in the armchair; "I will wait for you here. We leave to-morrow morning early, and I wish to know tonight what to depend upon."

As soon as Madame de Bergenheim had left the room, Christian arose and ran, rather than walked, to the space between the two windows, and sought the button in the woodwork of which Lambernier had told him. He soon found it, and upon his first pressure the spring worked and the panel flew open. The casket was upon the shelf; he took it and carefully examined the letters which it contained. The greater part of them resembled in form the one that he possessed; some of them were in envelopes directed to Madame de Bergenheim and bore Gerfaut's crest. There was no doubt about the identity of the handwriting; if the Baron had had any, these proofs were enough. After glancing rapidly over a few of the notes, he replaced them in the casket and returned the latter to the shelf where he had found it. He then carefully closed the little door and reseated himself beside the fireplace.

When Clemence returned, her husband seemed absorbed in reading one of the books which he had found upon her table, while he mechanically played with a little bronze cup that his wife used to drop her rings in when she removed them.

"I have won my case," said the Baroness, in a gay tone; "my aunt saw clearly the logic of the reasons which I gave her, and she defers her departure until your return."

Christian made no reply.

"That means that she will not go at all, for her anger will have time to cool off in three days; at heart she is really kind!--How long is it since you have known English?" she asked, as she noticed that her husband's attention seemed to be fixed upon a volume of Lord Byron's poems.

Bergenheim threw the book on the table, raised his head and gazed calmly at his wife. In spite of all his efforts, his face had assumed an expression which would have frightened her if she had noticed it, but her eyes were fastened upon the cup which he was twisting in his hand as if it were made of clay.

"Mon Dieu! Christian, what is the matter with you? What are you doing to my poor cup?" she asked, with surprise mingled with a little of that fright which is so prompt to be aroused if one feels not above reproach.

He arose and put the misshapen bronze upon the table.

"I do not know what ails me to-night," said he, "my nerves are unstrung."

I will leave you, for I need rest myself. I shall start to-morrow morning before you are up, and I shall return Wednesday."

"Not any later, I hope," she said, with that soft, sweet voice, from which, in such circumstances, very few women have the loyalty to abstain.

He went out without replying, for he feared he might be no longer master of himself; he felt, when offered this hypocritical, almost criminal, caress, as if he would like to end it all by killing her on the spot.

CHAPTER XXII

THE CRISIS

Twenty-four hours had passed. The Baron had departed early in the morning, and so had all his guests, with the exception of Gerfaut and the artist. The day passed slowly and tediously. Aline had been vexed, somewhat estranged from her sister-in-law since their conversation in the little parlor. Mademoiselle de Corandeuil was entirely occupied in restoring her poodle to health.

Marillac, who had been drinking tea ever since rising, dared not present his face, which showed the effects of his debauch of the night before, to the mistress of the house, whose exacting and aristocratic austerity he very much feared. He pretended to be ill, in order to delay the moment when he should be forced to make his appearance. Madame de Bergenheim did not leave her aunt, and thus avoided being alone with Octave--who, on account of these different complications, might have spent a continual tete-a-tete with her had she been so inclined. Christian's absence, instead of being a signal of deliverance for the lovers, seemed to have created a new misunderstanding, for Clemence felt that it would be a mean action to abuse the liberty her husband's departure gave her. She was thus very reserved during the day, when she felt that there were more facilities for yielding, but, in the evening, when alone in her apartment, this fictitious prudery disappeared. She spent the entire evening lying upon the divan in the little boudoir, dreaming of Octave, talking to him as if he could reply, putting into practice again that capitulation of conscience which permits our mind to wander on the brink of guilt, provided actions are strictly correct.

After a while this exaltation fell by degrees. When struggling earnestly, she had regarded Octave as an enemy; but, since she had gone to him as one passes over to the enemy, and, in her heart, had taken part with the lover against the husband, her courage failed her as she thought of this, and she fell, weak, guilty, and vanquished before the combat.

When she had played with her passion, she had given Christian little thought; she had felt it childish to bring her husband into an amusement that she believed perfectly harmless; then, when she wished to break her plaything, and found it made of iron and turning more and more into a

tyrannical yoke, she called to her aid the conjugal divinities, but in too faint a voice to be heard. Now the situation had changed again. Christian was no longer the insignificant ally that the virtuous wife had condemned, through self-conceit, to ignorant neutrality; he was the husband, in the hostile and fearful acceptance of the word. This man whom she had wronged would always have law on his side.

Religion sometimes takes pity on a wayward wife, but society is always ready to condemn her. She was his own, fastened to him by indissoluble bonds. He had marked her with his name like a thing of his own; he held the threads of her life in his hands; he was the dispenser of her fortune, the judge of her actions, and the master of their fireside. She had no dignity except through him. If he should withdraw his support for a single day, she would fall from her position without any human power being able to rescue her. Society closes its doors to the outcast wife, and adds to the husband's sentence another penalty still more scathing.

Having now fallen from the sphere of illusion to that of reality, Madame de Bergenheim was wounded at every step. A bitter feeling of discouragement overwhelmed her, as she thought of the impossibility of happiness to which a deplorable fatality condemned her. Marriage and love struggled for existence, both powerless to conquer, and qualified only to cause each other's death. Marriage made love a crime; love made marriage a torture. She could only choose between two abysses: shame in her love, despair in her virtue.

The hours passed rapidly in these sad and gloomy meditations; the clock marked the hour of midnight. Madame de Bergenheim thought it time to try to sleep; but, instead of ringing for her maid, she decided to go to the library herself and get a book, thinking that perhaps it might aid her in going to sleep. As she opened the door leading into the closet adjoining her parlor, she saw by the light of the candle which she held in her hand something which shone like a precious stone lying upon the floor. At first she thought it might be one of her rings, but as she stooped to pick it up she saw her error. It was a ruby pin mounted in enamelled gold. She recognized it, at the very first glance, as belonging to M. de Gerfaut.

She picked up the pin and returned to the parlor. She exhausted in imagination a thousand conjectures in order to explain the presence of this object in such a place. Octave must have entered it or he could not have left this sign of his presence; it meant that he could enter her room at his will; what he had done once, he could certainly do again! The terror which this thought gave her dissipated like a dash of cold water all her former intoxicating thoughts; for, like the majority of women, she had more courage in theory than in action. A moment before, she had invoked Octave's image and seated it lovingly by her side.

When she believed this realization possible, all she thought of was to prevent it. She was sure that her lover never had entered the closet through the parlor, as he never had been in this part of the house farther than the little drawing-room. Suddenly a thought of the little

corridor door struck her; she remembered that this door was not usually locked because the one from the library was always closed; she knew that Octave had a key to the latter, and she readily understood how he had reached her apartment. Mustering up all her courage through excessive fear, she returned to the closet, hurried down the stairs, and pushed the bolt. She then returned to the parlor and fell upon the divan, completely exhausted by her expedition.

Little by little her emotion passed away. Her fright appeared childish to her, as soon as she believed herself sheltered from danger; she promised herself to give Octave a good scolding the next morning; then she renounced this little pleasure, when she remembered that it would force her to admit the discovery of the pin, and of course to return it to him, for she had resolved to keep it. She had always had a particular fancy for this pin, but she would never have dared to ask him for it, and besides, it was the fact that Octave usually wore it that made it of infinite value to her. The desire to appropriate it was irresistible, since chance had thrown it into her hands. She tied a black satin ribbon about her white neck, and pinned it with the precious ruby. After kissing it as devotedly as if it were a relic, she ran to her mirror to judge of the effect of the theft.

"How pretty, and how I love it!" said she; "but how can I wear it so that he will not see it?"

Before she could solve this problem, she heard a slight noise, which petrified her as she stood before her glass.

"It is he!" she thought; after standing for a moment half stunned, she dragged herself as far as the stairs, and leaning over, listened with fear and trembling. At first she could hear nothing but the beating of her heart; then she heard the other noise again, and more distinctly. Somebody was turning the handle of the door, trying to open it. The unexpected obstacle of the bolt doubtless exasperated the would-be visitor, for the door was shaken and pushed with a violence which threatened to break the lock or push down the door.

Madame de Bergenheim's first thought was to run into her chamber and lock the door behind her;--the second showed her the danger that might result if the slightest noise should reach other ears. Not a moment was to be lost in hesitation. The young woman quickly descended the stairs and drew the bolt. The door opened softly and closed with the same precaution. The lamp from the parlor threw a feeble light upon the upper steps of the staircase, but the lower ones were in complete darkness. It was with her heart rather than her eyes that she recognized Octave; he could distinguish Madame de Bergenheim only in an indistinct way by her white dress, which was faintly outlined in the darkness; she stood before him silent and trembling with emotion, for she had not yet thought of a speech that would send him away.

He also felt the embarrassment usual in any one guilty of so foolhardy an action. He had expected to surprise Clemence, and he found her upon her guard; the thought of the disloyal part he was playing at this moment

made the blood mount to his cheeks and took away, for the time being, his ordinary assurance. He sought in vain for a speech which might first justify him and then conquer her. He had recourse to a method often employed in the absence of eloquence. He fell on his knees before the young woman and seized her hands; it seemed as if the violence of his emotions rendered him incapable of expressing himself except by silent adoration. As she felt his hands touch hers, Clemence drew back and said in a low voice:

"You disgust me!"

"Disgust!" he repeated, drawing himself up to his full height.

"Yes, and that is not enough," she continued, indignantly, "I ought to say scorn instead of disgust. You deceived me when you said you loved me--you infamously deceived me!"

"But I adore you!" he exclaimed, with vehemence; "what proof do you wish of my love?"

"Go! go away at once! A proof, did you say? I will accept only one: go, I order it, do you understand?"

Instead of obeying her, he seized her in his arms in spite of her resistance.

"Anything but that," he said; "order me to kill myself at your feet, I will do it, but I will not go."

She tried for a moment to disengage herself, but although she used all her strength, she was unable to do so.

"Oh, you are without pity," she said, feebly, "but I abhor you; rather, a thousand times rather, kill me!"

Gerfaut was almost frightened by the agonized accent in which she spoke these words; he released her, but as he removed his arms, she reeled and he was obliged to support her.

"Why do you persecute me, then?" she murmured, as she fell in a faint upon her lover's breast.

He picked her up in his arms and mounted the narrow stairs with difficulty. Carrying her into the parlor, he placed her upon the divan. She had completely lost consciousness; one would have believed her dead from the pallor of her face, were, it not for a slight trembling which agitated her form every few seconds and announced a nervous attack. The most expert of lady's maids could not have removed the little ribbon from her neck, which seemed to trouble her respiration, more adroitly than did Octave. In spite of his anxiety, he could not repress a smile as he recognized the pin which he hardly expected to find upon Clemence's neck, considering the hostile way in which she had greeted him. He knelt before her and bathed her temples with cold water, making her also inhale

some salts which he found upon the toilet table in the next room. Little by little, these attentions produced an effect; the nervous convulsion became less frequent and a slight flush suffused her pale cheeks. She opened her eyes and then closed them, as if the light troubled them; then, extending her arms, she passed them about Octave's neck as he leaned over her; she remained thus for some time, breathing quietly and to all appearances sleeping. Suddenly she said:

"You will give me your pin, will you not?"

"Is not all that I have yours?" he replied, in a low tone.

"Mine!" she continued, in a feebly loving voice; "tell me again that you belong to me, to me alone, Octave!"

"You do not send me away any longer, then? you like me to be near you?" he said, with a happy smile, as he kissed the young woman's brow.

"Oh! stay, I beg of you! stay with me forever!"

She folded her arms more tightly around him, as if she feared he might leave her. Suddenly she sat up, opened her eyes, and gazed about her in silent astonishment.

"What has happened?" said she, "and how is it that you are here? Ah! this is dreadful indeed; you have cruelly punished me for my weakness."

This sudden severity after her delicious abandon, changed Octave's pleasure into angry vexation.

"You are the one," he replied, "who are cruel! Why allow me so much bliss, if you intended to take it away from me so soon? Since you love me only in your dreams, I beg of you to go to sleep again and never awaken. I will stay near you. Your words were so sweet, but a moment ago, and now you deny them!"

"What did I say?" she asked, with hesitation, a deep blush suffusing her face and neck.

These symptoms, which he considered a bad augury, increased Octave's irritation. He arose and said in a bitter tone:

"Fear nothing! I will not abuse the words which have escaped you, however flattering or charming they may have been; they told me that you loved me. I do not believe it any longer; you are agitated, I can see; but it is from fear and not love."

Clemence drew herself up upon the divan, crossed her arms over her breast and gazed at him for a few moments in silence.

"Do you believe these two sentiments incompatible?" she asked at last; "you are the only one whom I fear. Others would not complain."

There was such irresistible charm in her voice and glance that Gerfaut's ill-humor melted away like ice in the sun's rays. He fell upon his knees before the divan, and tried to pass her arms about his neck as before; but instead of lending herself to this project, she attempted to rise.

"I am so happy at your feet," he said, gently preventing her. "Everybody else can sit beside you; I only have the right to kneel. Do not take this right away from me."

Madame de Bergenheim extricated one of her hands, and, raising her finger with a threatening gesture, she said:

"Think a little less of your rights, and more of your duties. I advise you to obey me and to profit by my kindness, which allows you to sit by my side for a moment. Think that I might be more severe, and that if I treated you as you merited--if I told you to go away, would you obey me?"

Gerfaut hesitated a moment and looked at her supplicatingly.

"I would obey," said he; "but would you have the courage to order it?"

"I allow you to remain until just half past twelve," said she, as she glanced at the clock, which she could see through the half-open door. Gerfaut followed her glance, and saw that she accorded him only a quarter of an hour: but he was too clever to make any observation. He knew that the second quarter of an hour is always less difficult to obtain than the first.

"I am sure," said she, "that you have thought me capricious to-day; you must pardon me, it is a family fault. You know the saying: 'Caprice de Corandeuil?'"

"I wish it to be said: Amour de Gerfaut," said he, tenderly.

"You are right to be amiable and say pleasant things to me, for I need them badly to-night. I am sad and weary; the darkest visions come before my mind. I think it is the storm which makes me feel so. How doleful this thunder is! It seems to me like an omen of misfortune."

"It is only the fancy of your vivid imagination. If you exerted the same will to be happy that you do to imagine troubles, our life would be perfect. What matters the storm? and even if you do see an omen in it, what is there so very terrible? Clouds are vapor, thunder is a sound, both are equally ephemeral; only the blue sky, which they can obscure but for a moment, is eternal."

"Did you not hear something just now?" asked Madame de Bergenheim, as she gave a sudden start and listened eagerly.

"Nothing. What did you think it was?"

"I feared it might be Justine who had taken it into her head to come down stairs; she is so tiresome in her attentions--"

She arose and went to look in her chamber, which she carefully locked; a moment later, she returned and seated herself again upon the divan.

"Justine is sleeping by this time," said Octave; "I should not have ventured if I had not seen that her light was out."

Clemence took his hand and placed it over her heart.

"Now," said she, "when I tell you that I am frightened, will you believe me?"

"Poor dear!" he exclaimed, as he felt her heart throbbing violently.

"You are the one who causes me these palpitations for the slightest thing. I know that we do not run any danger, that everybody is in his own room by this time, and yet, somehow, I feel terribly frightened. There are women, so they say, who get used to this torture, and end by being guilty and tranquil at the same time. It is an unworthy thought, but I'll confess that, sometimes, when I suffer so, I wish I were like them. But it is impossible; I was not made for wrong-doing. You can not understand this, you are a man; you love boldly, you indulge in every thought that seems sweet to you without being troubled by remorse. And then, when you suffer, your anguish at least belongs to you, nobody has any right to ask you what is the matter. But I, my tears even are not my own; I have often shed them on your account--I must hide them, for he has a right to ask: 'Why do you weep?' And what can I reply?"

She turned away her head to conceal the tears which she could not restrain; he saw them, and, leaning over her, he kissed them away.

"Your tears are mine!" he exclaimed, passionately; "but do not distress me by telling me that our love makes you unhappy."

"Unhappy! oh, yes! very unhappy! and yet I would not change this sorrow for the richest joys of others. This unhappiness is my treasure! To be loved by you! To think that there was a time when our love might have been legitimate! What fatality weighs upon us, Octave? Why did we know each other too late? I often dream a beautiful dream--a dream of freedom."

"You are free if you love me--It is the rain against the windows," said he, seeing Madame de Bergenheim anxiously listening again. They kept silent for a moment, but could hear nothing except the monotonous whistling of the storm.

"To be loved by you and not to blush!" said she, as she gazed at him lovingly. "To be together always, without fearing that a stroke of lightning might separate us! to give you my heart and still be worthy to pray! it would be one of those heavenly delights that one grasps only in dreams--"

"Oh! dream when I shall be far from you; but, when I am at your feet,

when our hearts beat only for each other, do not evoke, lest you destroy our present happiness, that which is beyond our power. Do you think there are bonds which can more strongly unite us? Am I not yours? And you, yourself, who speak of the gift of your heart, have you not given it to me entirely?"

"Oh! yes, entirely! And it is but right, since I owe it to you. I did not understand life until the day I received it from your eyes; since that minute I have lived, and I can die. I love you! I fail to find words to tell you one-tenth of what my heart contains, but I love you--"

He received her in his arms, where she took refuge so as to conceal her face after these words. She remained thus for an instant, then arose with a start, seized Octave's hands and pressed them in a convulsive manner, saying in a voice as weak as a dying woman's:

"I am lost!"

He instinctively followed Clemence's gaze, which was fastened upon the glass door. An almost imperceptible movement of the muslin curtain was evident. At the same moment, there was a slight noise, a step upon the carpet, the turning of the handle of the door, and it was silently opened as if by a ghost.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE AGREEMENT

Madame de Bergenheim tried to rise, but her strength failed her, she fell on her knees, and then dropped at her lover's feet. The latter leaped from the divan with out trying to assist her, stepped over the body stretched before him, and drew his poniard out of his pocket.

Christian stood upon the threshold of the door silent and motionless.

There was a moment of terrible silence. Only the eyes of the two men spoke; those of the husband were fixed, dull, and implacable; those of the lover sparkled with the audacity of despair. After a moment of mutual fascination, the Baron made a movement as if to enter.

"One step more and you are a dead man!" exclaimed Gerfaut, in a low voice, as he clutched the handle of his poniard.

Christian extended his hand, replying to this threat only by a look; but such an imperative one that the thrust of a lance would not have been as fearful to the lover. Octave put his poniard in its sheath, ashamed of his emotion in the presence of such calm, and imitated his enemy's scornful attitude.

"Come, Monsieur," said the latter, in a low voice, as he took a step

backward.

Instead of following his example, Gerfaut cast a glance upon Clemence. She had fallen in such a dead faint that he sought in vain for her breath. He leaned over her, with an irresistible feeling of pity and love; but just as he was about to take her in his arms and place her upon the divan, Bergenheim's hand stopped him. If there is a being on earth to whom one owes regard and respect, it is the one whom our own wrong has rendered our enemy. Octave arose, and said, in a grave, resigned voice:

"I am at your orders, Monsieur."

Christian pointed to the door, as if to invite him to pass out first, thus preserving, with his extraordinary composure, the politeness which a good education makes an indelible habit, but which at this moment was more frightful to behold than the most furious outburst of temper. Gerfaut glanced at Clemence again, and said, as he pointed to her:

"Shall you leave her without any aid in this condition? It is cruel."

"It is not from cruelty, but out of pity," replied the Baron, coldly; "she will awake only too soon."

Octave's heart was intensely oppressed, but he managed to conceal his emotion. He hesitated no longer and stepped out. The husband followed, without giving a glance at the poor woman whose own words had condemned her so inexorably. And so she was left alone in this pretty boudoir as if in a tomb.

The two men descended the stairs leading from the little closet. At the library door they found themselves in absolute obscurity; Christian opened a dark-lantern and its faint light guided their steps. They traversed, in silence, the picture-gallery, the vestibule, and then mounted the main staircase. They reached the Baron's apartment without meeting anybody or betraying themselves by the slightest sound. With the same outward self-possession which had characterized his whole conduct, Christian, after carefully closing the doors, lighted a candelabra filled with candles which was upon the mantel, and then turned to his companion, who was far less composed than he.

Gerfaut had suffered tortures since leaving the little parlor. A feeling of regret and deepest pity, at the thought of the inevitable catastrophe which must follow, had softened his heart. He saw in the most odious of colors the selfishness of his love. Clemence's last glance as she fell fainting at his feet--a forgiving and a loving glance--was like a dagger in his heart. He had ruined her! the woman he loved! the queen of his life! the angel he adored! This idea was like hell to him. He was almost unable to control his emotion, dizzy as he was on the brink of the abyss opened by his hand, into which he had precipitated what he counted as the dearest part of his own self.

Bergenheim stood, cold and sombre, like a northern sky, opposite this pale-faced man, upon whose countenance a thousand passionate emotions

were depicted like clouds on a stormy day.

When Bergenheim's eyes met Octave's, they were so full of vengeance and hatred that the latter trembled as if he had come in contact with a wild beast. The lover actually realized the inferiority of his attitude in the presence of this enraged husband. A feeling of self-pride and indignation came to his aid. He put aside remorse and regrets until later; these sad expiations were forbidden him now; another duty lay before him. There is only one reparation possible for certain offences. The course once open, one must go to its very end; pardon is to be found only upon the tomb of the offended.

Octave knew he had to submit to this necessity. He stifled all scruples which might have weakened his firmness, and resumed his habitual disdainful look. His eyes returned his enemy's glance of deadly hatred, and he began the conversation like a man who is accustomed to master the events of his life and forbids any one to shape them for him.

"Before any explanations take place between us," he said, "I have to declare to you, upon my honor, that there is only one guilty person in this affair, and that I am the one. The slightest reproach addressed to Madame de Bergenheim would be a most unjust outrage and a most deplorable error on your part. I introduced myself into her apartment without her knowledge and without having been authorized in any way to do so. I had just entered it when you arrived. Necessity obliges me to admit a love that is an outrage to you; I am ready to repair this outrage by any satisfaction you may demand; but in putting myself at your discretion, I earnestly insist upon exculpating Madame de Bergenheim from all that can in any way affect her virtue or her reputation."

"As to her reputation," said Christian, "I will watch over that; as to her virtue--"

He did not finish, but his face assumed an expression of incredulous irony.

"I swear to you, Monsieur," said Octave, with increasing emotion, "that she is above all seduction and should be sheltered from all insult; I swear to you--What oath can I take that you will believe? I swear that Madame de Bergenheim never has betrayed any of her duties toward you; that I never have received the slightest encouragement from her; that she is as innocent of my folly as the angels in heaven."

Christian shook his head with a scornful smile.

"This day will be the undying remorse of my life if you will not believe me," said Gerfaut, with almost uncontrolled vehemence; "I tell you, Monsieur, she is innocent; innocent! do you understand me? I was led astray by my passion. I wished to profit by your absence. You know that I have a key to the library; I used it without her suspecting it. Would to God that you could have been a witness to our tete-a-tete! you could then have not one doubt left. Can one prevent a man from entering a lady's room, when he has succeeded in finding the way to it in spite of

her wishes? I repeat it, she--"

"Enough, Monsieur," replied the Baron coldly. "You are doing as I should do in your place; but this discussion is out of place; let this woman exculpate herself. There should be no mention of her between us now."

"When I protest that upon my honor--"

"Monsieur, under such conditions, a false oath is not dishonorable. I have been a bachelor myself, and I know that anything is allowable against a husband. Let us drop this, I beg of you, and return to facts. I consider that I have been insulted by you, and you must give me satisfaction for this insult."

Octave made a sign of acquiescence.

"One of us must die," replied Bergenheim, leaning his elbow negligently upon the mantel. The lover bowed his head a second time.

"I have offended you," said he; "you have the right to choose the reparation due you."

"There is only one possible, Monsieur. Blood alone can wipe away the disgrace; you know it as well as I. You have dishonored my home, you owe me your life for that. If Fate favors you, you will be rid of me, and I shall be wronged in every way. There are arrangements to be made, and we shall settle them at once, if you are willing."

He pushed an armchair toward Gerfaut, and took another himself.

They seated themselves beside a desk which stood in the middle of the room, and, with an equal appearance of sang-froid and polite haughtiness, they discussed this murderous combat.

"It is not necessary for me to say to you," said Octave, "that I accept in advance whatever you may decide upon; the weapons, place, and seconds--"

"Listen to me, then," interrupted Bergenheim; "you just now spoke in favor of this woman in a way that made me think you did not wish her ruined in the eyes of the world; so I trust you will accept the proposition I am about to make to you. An ordinary duel would arouse suspicion and inevitably lead to a discovery of the truth; people would seek for some plausible motive for the encounter, whatever story we might tell our seconds. You know that there is but one motive which will be found acceptable by society for a duel between a young man who had been received as a guest of this house and the husband. In whatever way this duel may terminate, this woman's honor would remain on the ground with the dead, and that is what I wish to avoid, since she bears my name."

"Will you explain to me what your plan is?" asked Octave, who could not understand what his adversary had in mind.

"You know, Monsieur," Bergenheim continued, in his calm voice, "that I had a perfect right to kill you a moment ago; I did not do so for two reasons: first, a gentleman should use his sword and not a poniard, and then your dead body would have embarrassed me."

"The river is close by!" interrupted Gerfaut, with a strange smile.

Christian looked at him fixedly for a moment, and then replied in a slightly changed tone:

"Instead of availing myself of my right, I intend to risk my life against yours. The danger is the same for myself, who never have insulted you, as for you, who have offered me the deadliest insult that one man can offer another. I am willing to spill my blood, but not to soil my honor."

"If it is a duel without seconds that you desire, you have my consent; I have perfect confidence in your loyalty, and I hope you can say the same for mine."

Christian bowed his head slightly and continued:

"It is more than a duel without seconds, for the whole affair must be so contrived as to be looked upon as an accident; it is the only way to prevent the outbreak and scandal I dread so much. Now here is my proposition: You know that a wild-boar hunt is to take place to-morrow in the Mares woods. When we station ourselves we shall be placed together at a spot I know of, where we shall be out of the sight of the other hunters. When the boar crosses the enclosure we will fire at a signal agreed upon. In this way, the denouement, whatever it may be, will be looked upon as one of those accidents which so frequently happen in shooting-parties."

"I am a dead man," thought Gerfaut, as he saw that the gun would be the weapon chosen by his adversary, and recalled his wonderful skill, of which he had had many and various proofs. But instead of showing the slightest hesitation, his countenance grew still more arrogant.

"This kind of combat seems to me very wisely planned," said he;
"I accept, for I desire as much as you that this affair should remain an eternal secret."

"Since we are to have no seconds," continued Bergenheim, "let us arrange everything so that nothing can betray us; it is inconceivable how the most trifling circumstances often turn out crushing evidence. I think that I have foreseen everything. If you find that I have forgotten any detail, please remind me of it. The place I speak of is a narrow, well-shaded path. The ground is perfectly level; it lies from north to south, so that at eight o'clock in the morning the sun will be on that side; there will be no advantage in position. There is an old elm on the borders of the wood; at fifty steps' distance in the pathway, lies the trunk of an oak which has been felled this year. These are the two places where we will station ourselves, if you consent to it. Is it the

proper distance?"

"Near or farther, it matters little. Breast to breast, if you like."

"Nearer would be imprudent. However, fifty steps with the gun is less than fifteen with a pistol. This point is settled. We will remain with heads covered, although this is not the custom. A ball might strike the head where the cap would be, and if this should happen it would arouse suspicion, as people do not hunt bareheaded. It only remains to decide who shall fire first," continued Christian.

"You, of course; you are the offended one."

"You do not admit the full offence to have been committed, and, since this is in doubt, and I can not be judge and jury together, we shall consult chance."

"I declare to you that I will not fire first," interrupted Gerfaut.

"Remember that it is a mortal duel, and such scruples are foolish. Let us agree that whoever has the first shot, shall place himself upon the border of the woods and await the signal, which the other will give when the boar crosses the enclosure."

He took a gold piece from his purse and threw it in the air.

"Heads!" said the lover, ready to acquiesce to the least of his adversary's conditions.

"Fate is for you," said Christian, looking at the coin with marked indifference; "but, remember, if at the signal given by me you do not fire, or only fire in the air, I shall use my right to shoot--You know that I rarely miss my aim."

These preliminaries ended, the Baron took two guns from his closet, loaded them, taking particular care to show that they were of equal length and the same calibre. He then locked them up in the closet and offered Gerfaut the key.

"I would not do you this injustice," said the latter.

"This precaution is hardly necessary, since, tomorrow, you will take your choice of those weapons. Now that everything is arranged," continued the Baron, in a graver tone, "I have one request to make of you, and I think you are too loyal to refuse it. Swear to me that whatever may be the result, you will keep all this a profound secret. My honor is now in your hands; speaking as a gentleman to a gentleman, I ask you to respect it."

"If I have the sad privilege of surviving you," replied Gerfaut, no less solemnly, "I swear to you to keep the secret inviolate. But, supposing a contrary event, I also have a request to make to you. What are your intentions regarding Madame de Bergenheim?"

Christian gazed at his adversary a moment, with a searching glance which seemed to read his innermost thoughts.

"My intentions?" said he at last, in a displeased, surprised tone; "this is a very strange question; I do not recognize your right to ask it."

"My right is certainly strange," said the lover, with a bitter smile; "but whatever it may be, I shall make use of it. I have destroyed this woman's happiness forever; if I can not repair this fault, at least I ought to mitigate the effect as much as lies in my power. Will you reply to me--if I die tomorrow, what will be her fate?"

Bergenheim kept silent, his sombre eyes lowered to the floor.

"Listen to me, Monsieur," continued Gerfaut, with great emotion; "when I said to you, 'She is not guilty,' you did not believe me, and I despair of ever persuading you, for I know well what your suspicions must be. However, these are the last words addressed to you that will leave my mouth, and you know that one has to believe a dying man's statement. If tomorrow you avenge yourself, I earnestly beg of you, let this reparation suffice. All my pride is gone, you see, since I beg this of you upon my bended knees. Be humane toward her; spare her, Monsieur. It is not pardon which I ask you to grant her--it is pity for her unsullied innocence. Treat her kindly--honorably. Do not make her too wretched."

He stopped, for his voice failed him, and his eyes filled with tears.

"I know what I ought to do," replied the Baron, in as harsh a tone as Gerfaut's had been tender; "I am her husband, and I do not recognize anybody's right, yours least of all, to interpose between us."

"I can foresee the fate which you have in reserve for her," replied the lover, indignantly; "you will not murder her, for that would be too imprudent; what would become of your vaunted honor then? But you will slowly kill her; you will make her die a new death every day, in order to satisfy a blind vengeance. You are a man to meditate over each new torture as calmly as you have regulated every detail of our duel."

Bergenheim, instead of replying, lighted a candle as if to put an end to this discussion.

"Until to-morrow, Monsieur," said he, with a cold air.

"One moment!" exclaimed Gerfaut, as he arose; "you refuse to give me one word which will assure me of the fate of the woman whose life I have ruined?"

"I have nothing to say."

"Very well, then; I will protect her, and I will do it in spite of you and against you."

"Not another word," interrupted the Baron, sternly.

Octave leaned over the table between them and looked at him for a moment, then said in a terrible voice:

"You killed Lambernier!"

Christian bounded backward as if he had been struck.

"I was a witness of that murder," continued Gerfaut, slowly, as he emphasized each word; "I will write my deposition and give it to a man of whom I am as sure as of myself. If I die to-morrow, I will leave him a mission which no effort on your part will prevent him from fulfilling. He shall watch over your slightest actions with inexorable vigilance; he will be Madame de Bergenheim's protector, if you forget that your first duty is to protect her. The day upon which you abuse your position with her, the day when she shall call out despairingly, 'Help me!' that day shall my deposition be placed in the hands of the public prosecutor at Nancy. He will believe its contents; of that you may be certain. Besides, the river is an indiscreet tomb; before long it will give up the body you have confided to it. You will be tried and condemned. You know the punishment for murder! It is hard labor for life."

Bergenheim darted toward the mantel at these words and seized a hunting-knife which hung there. Octave, as he saw him ready to strike, crossed his arms upon his breast, and said, coldly:

"Remember that my body might embarrass you; one corpse is enough."

The Baron threw the weapon on the floor with such force that he broke it in two.

"But it was you," he said, in a trembling voice, "you were Lambernier's assassin. I--He knew this infamous secret, and his death was involuntary on my part."

"The intention is of little account. The deed is the question. There is not a jury that would not condemn you, and that is what I wish, for such a sentence would bring a legal separation between you and your wife and give her her liberty."

"You are not speaking seriously," said Christian, turning pale; "you, a gentleman, would not denounce me! And, besides, would not my being sentenced injure the woman in whom you take so much interest?"

"I know all that," Gerfaut replied; "I too cling to the honor of my name, and yet I expose it. I have plenty of enemies who will be glad enough to outrage my memory. Public opinion will condemn me, for they will see only the action, and that is odious. There is one thing, however, more precious and necessary to me than the world's opinion, and that is peace for every day, the right to live; and that is the reason why, happiness having forsaken me, I am going to bequeath it to the one whom fate has put in your power, but whom I shall not leave to your mercy."

"I am her husband," Bergenheim replied, angrily.

"Yes, you are her husband; so the law is on your side. You have only to call upon society for its aid; it will come but too gladly at your call and help you crush a defenceless woman. And I, who love her as you have never known how to love her, I can do nothing for her! Living, I must keep silent and bow before your will; but dead, your absurd laws no longer exist for me; dead, I can place myself between you and her, and I will do it. Since, in order to aid her, I have no choice of arms, I will not recoil from the one weapon which presents itself. Yes, if in order to save her from your vengeance, I am obliged to resort to the shame of a denunciation, I swear to you here, I will turn informer. I will sully my name with this stain; I will pick up this stone from the mud, and I will crush your head with it."

"These are a coward's words!" exclaimed Christian, as he fell back in his chair.

Gerfaut looked at him with a calm, stony glance, while replying:

"No insults, please! One of us will not be living to-morrow. Remember what I tell you: if I fall in this duel, it will be to your interest to have this matter stop then and there. I submit to death myself; but I exact liberty for her--liberty, with peace and respect. Think it over, Monsieur; at the first outrage, I shall arise from my tomb to prevent a second, and dig a trench between you and her which never can be crossed--the penitentiary!"

CHAPTER XXIV

A FRIEND'S ADVICE

After she came out of her faint, Madame de Bergenheim remained for a long time in a dazed condition, and did not realize, save in a confused manner, her real position. She saw vaguely, at her first glance, the curtains of the bed upon which she lay, and thought that she had awakened from an ordinary sleep. Little by little, her thoughts became clearer, and she saw that she was fully dressed, also that her room seemed brighter than it usually was with only her night-lamp lighted. She noticed between the half-open curtains a gigantic form reflected almost to the ceiling opposite her bed. She sat up and distinctly saw a man sitting in the corner by the fireplace. Frozen with terror, she fell back upon her pillow as she recognized her husband. Then she remembered everything, even the slightest details of the scene in the small parlor. She felt ready to faint again when she heard Christian's steps upon the carpet, although he walked with great precaution.

The Baron looked at her a moment, and then, opening the bed-curtains, he said:

"You can not pass the night thus, it is nearly three o'clock. You must go to bed as usual."

Clemence shivered at these words, whose accent, however, was not hard. She obeyed mechanically; but she had hardly risen when she was obliged to recline upon the bed, for her trembling limbs would not support her.

"Do not be afraid of me," said Bergenheim, drawing back a few steps; "my presence should not frighten you. I only wish that people should know that I have passed the night in your chamber, for it is possible that my return may arouse suspicion. You know that our love is only a comedy played for the benefit of our servants."

There was such affected lightness in these remarks that the young woman was cut to the very quick. She had expected an explosion of anger, but not this calm contempt. Her revolted pride gave her courage.

"I do not deserve to be treated thus," said she; "do not condemn me without a hearing."

"I ask nothing of you," replied Christian, who seated himself again beside the mantel; "undress yourself, and go to sleep if it is possible for you to do so. It is not necessary for Justine to make any comments tomorrow about your day clothes not having been removed."

Instead of obeying him, she went toward him and tried to remain standing in order to speak to him, but her emotion was so intense that it took away her strength and she was obliged to sit down.

"You treat me too cruelly, Christian," said she, when she had succeeded to recover her voice. "I am not guilty; at least, not so much as you think I am--" said she, drooping her head.

He looked at her attentively for a moment, and then replied, in a voice which did not betray the slightest emotion:

"You must know that my greatest desire is to be persuaded of this by you. I know that too often appearances are deceitful; perhaps you will be able to explain to me what took place last evening; I am still inclined to believe your word. Swear to me that you do not love Monsieur de Gerfaut."

"I swear it!" said she, in a weak voice, and without raising her eyes.

He went to the bed and took down a little silver crucifix which was hanging above it.

"Swear it to me upon this crucifix," said he, presenting it to his wife.

She tried in vain to raise her hand, which seemed fastened to the arm of her chair.

"I swear it!" she stammered a second time, while her face became as pale as death.

A savage laugh escaped Christian's lips. He put the crucifix in its place again without saying a word, then he opened the secret panel and, taking out the casket, placed it upon the table before his wife. She made a movement as if to seize it, but her courage failed her.

"You have perjured yourself to your husband and to God!" said Bergenheim slowly. "Do you know what kind of woman you are?"

Clemence remained for some time powerless to reply; her respiration was so painful that each breath seemed like suffocation; her head, after rolling about on the back of the chair, fell upon her breast, like a blade of grass broken and bruised by the rain.

"If you have read those letters," she murmured, when she had strength enough to speak, "you must know that I am not as unworthy as you think. I am very guilty--but I still have a right to be forgiven."

Christian, at this moment, had he been gifted with the intelligence which fathoms the mysteries of the heart, might have renewed the bonds which were so near being broken; he could at least have stopped Clemence upon a dangerous path and saved her from a most irreparable fall. But his nature was too unrefined for him to see the degrees which separate weakness from vice, and the intoxication of a loving heart from the depravity of a corrupt character. With the obstinacy of narrow-minded people, he had been looking at the whole thing in its worst light, and for several hours already he had decided upon his wife's guilt in his own mind; this served now as a foundation for his stern conduct. His features remained perfectly impassive as he listened to Clemence's words of justification, which she uttered in a weak, broken voice.

"I know that I merit your hatred-but if you could know how much I suffer, you would surely forgive me--You left me in Paris very young, inexperienced; I ought to have fought against this feeling better than I did, but I used up in this struggle all the strength that I had--You can see how pale and changed I have become within the past year. I have aged several years in those few months; I am not yet what you call a--a lost woman. He ought to have told you that--"

"Oh, he has! of course he has," replied Christian with bitter irony.

"Oh, you have in him a loyal cavalier!"

"You do not believe me, then! you do not believe me!" she continued, wringing her hands in despair; "but read these letters, the last ones. See whether one writes like this to a woman who is entirely lost--"

She tried to take the package which her husband held; instead of giving the letters to her, he lighted them at the candle and then threw them into the fireplace. Clemence uttered a cry and darted forward to save them, but Christian's iron hand seized her and pushed her back into her chair.

"I understand how much you care for this correspondence," said he, in a more excited tone, "but you are more loving than prudent. Let me destroy one witness which accuses you. Do you know that I have already killed a man on account of these letters?"

"Killed!" exclaimed Madame de Bergenheim, whom this word drove almost to madness, for she could not understand its real meaning and applied it to her lover. "Well, then, kill me too, for I lied when I said that I repented. I do not repent! I am guilty! I deceived you! I love him and I abhor you; I love him! kill me!"

She fell upon her knees before him and dragged herself along the floor, striking her head upon it as if she wished to break it. Christian raised her and seated her in the chair, in spite of her resistance. She struggled in her husband's arms, and the only words which she uttered were: "I love him! kill me! I love him! kill me!"

Her grief was so intense that Bergenheim really pitied her.

"You did not understand me," he said, "he is not the man I killed."

She became motionless, dumb. He left her then, from a feeling of compassion, and returned to his seat. They remained for some time seated in this way, one on each side of the fireplace; he, with his head leaning against the mantel; she, crouched in her chair with her face concealed behind her hands; only the striking of the clock interrupted this silence and lulled their gloomy thoughts with its monotonous vibrations.

A sharp, quick sound against one of the windows interrupted this sad scene. Clemence arose suddenly as if she had received a galvanic shock; her frightened eyes met her husband's. He made an imperious gesture with his hand as if to order silence, and both listened attentively and anxiously.

The same noise was heard a second time. A rattling against the blinds was followed by a dry, metallic sound, evidently caused by the contact of some body against the window.

"It is some signal," said Christian in a low voice, as he looked at his wife. "You probably know what it means."

"I do not, I swear to you," replied Clemence, her heart throbbing with a new emotion.

"I will tell you, then; he is there and he has something to say to you. Rise and open the window."

"Open the window?" said she, with a frightened look.

"Do what I tell you. Do you wish him to pass the night under your window, so that the servants may see him?"

At this command, spoken in a severe tone, she arose. Noticing that their shadows might be seen from the outside when the curtains were drawn, Bergenheim changed the candles to another place. Clemence walked slowly toward the window; she had hardly opened it, when a purse fell upon the floor.

"Close it now," said the Baron. While his wife was quietly obeying, he picked up the purse, and opening it, took the following note from it:

"I have ruined you--you for whom I would gladly have died! But of what use are regrets and despair now? And my blood will not wipe away your tears. Our position is so frightful that I tremble so speak of it. I ought to tell you the truth, however, horrible as it may be. Do not curse me, Clemence; do not impute to me this fatality, which obliges me thus to torture you. In a few hours I shall have expiated the wrongs of my love, or you yourself may be free. Free! pardon me for using this word; I know it is an odious one to you, but I am too troubled to find another. Whatever happens, I am about to put within your reach the only aid which it is possible for me to offer you; it will at least give you a choice of unhappiness. If you never see me again, to live with him will be a torture beyond your strength, perhaps, for you love me. I do not know how to express my thoughts, and I dare not offer you advice or entreat you. All that I feel is the necessity of telling you that my whole life belongs to you, that I am yours until death; but I hardly dare have the courage to lay at your feet the offering of a destiny already so sad, and which may soon be stained with blood. A fatal necessity sometimes imposes actions which public opinion condemns, but the heart excuses, for it alone understands them. Do not be angry at what you are about to read; never did words like these come out of a more desolate heart. During the whole day a post-chaise will wait for you at the rear of the Montigny plateau; a fire lighted upon the rock which you can see from your room will notify you of its presence. In a short time it can reach the Rhine. A person devoted to you will accompany you to Munich, to the house of one of my relatives, whose character and position will assure you sufficient protection from all tyranny. There, at least, you will be permitted to weep. That is all that I can do for you. My heart is broken when I think of the powerlessness of my love. They say that when one crushes the scorpion which has wounded him, he is cured; even my death will not repair the wrong that I have done you; it will only be one grief the more. Can you understand how desperate is the feeling which I experience now? For months past, to be loved by you has been the sole desire of my heart, and now I must repent ever having attained it. Out of pity for you, I ought to wish that you did love me with a love as perishable as my life, so that a remembrance of me would leave you in peace. All this is so sad that I have not the courage to continue. Adieu, Clemence! Once more, one last time, I must say: I love you! and yet, I dare not. I feel unworthy to speak to you thus, for my love has become a disastrous gift. Did I not ruin you? The only word that seems to be permissible is the one that even a murderer dares to address to his God: pardon me!"

After reading this, the Baron passed the letter to his wife without saying a word, and resumed his sombre attitude.

"You see what he asks of you?" he said, after a rather long pause, as he observed the dazed way in which Madame de Bergenheim's eyes wandered over this letter.

"My head is bewildered," she replied, "I do not understand what he says-- Why does he speak of death?"

Christian's lips curled disdainfully as he answered:

"It does not concern you; one does not kill women."

"They need it not to die," replied Clemence, who gazed at her husband with wild, haggard eyes.

"Then you are going to fight?" she added, after a moment's pause.

"Really, have you divined as much?" he replied, with an ironical smile; "it is a wonderful thing how quick is your intelligence! You have spoken the truth. You see, each of us has his part to play. The wife deceives her husband; the husband fights with the lover, and the lover in order to close the comedy in a suitable manner--proposes to run away with the wife, for that is the meaning of his letter, notwithstanding all his oratorical precautions."

"You are going to fight!" she exclaimed, with the energy of despair.

"You are going to fight! And for me--unworthy and miserable creature that I am! What have you done? And is he not free to love? I alone am the guilty one, I alone have offended you, and I alone deserve punishment. Do with me what you will; shut me up in a convent or a cell; bring me poison, I will drink it."

The Baron burst into sardonic laughter.

"So you are afraid that I shall kill, him?" said he, gazing at her intently, with his arms crossed upon his breast.

"I fear for you, for us all. Do you think that I can live after causing blood to be shed? If there must be a victim, take me--or, at least, begin with me. Have pity! tell me that you will not fight."

"But think--there is an even chance that you may be set free!" said he.

"Spare me!" she murmured, shivering with horror.

"It is a pity that blood must be shed, is it not?" said Bergenheim, in a mocking tone; "adultery would be pleasant but for that. I am sure that you think me coarse and brutal to look upon your honor as a serious thing, when you do not do so yourself."

"I entreat you!"

"I am the one who has to entreat you. This astonishes you, does it not?
--While I live, I shall protect your reputation in spite of yourself; but
if I die, try to guard it yourself. Content yourself with having
betrayed me; do not outrage my memory. I am glad now that we have no
children, for I should fear for them, and should feel obliged to deprive
you of their care as much as lay in my power. That is one trouble the
less. But as you bear my name, and I can not take it away from you,
I beg of you do not drag it in the mire when I shall not be here to wash
it for you."

The young woman fell back upon her seat as if every fibre in her body had
been successively torn to pieces.

"You crush me to the earth!" she said, feebly.

"This revolts you," continued the husband, who seemed to choose the most
cutting thrust; "you are young; this is your first error, you are not
made for such adventures. But rest assured, one becomes accustomed to
everything. A lover always knows how to find the most beautiful phrases
with which to console a widow and vanquish her repugnances."

"You are killing me," she murmured, falling back almost unconscious in
her chair.

Christian leaned over her, and, taking her by the arm, said in a low
tone:

"Remember, if I die and he asks you to follow him, you will be an
infamous creature if you obey him. He is a man to glory in you; that is
easy enough to see. He is a man who would drag you after him--"

"Oh! have pity--I shall die--"

Clemence closed her eyes and her lips twitched convulsively.

The first rays of the morning sun fell upon another scene in the opposite
wing of the chateau. Marillac was quietly sleeping the sleep of the just
when he was suddenly awakened by a shaking that nearly threw him out of
his bed.

"Go to the devil!" he said, angrily, when he succeeded in half opening
his heavy eyes, and recognized Gerfaut standing beside his bed.

"Get up!" said the latter, taking him by the arm to give more force to
his command.

The artist covered himself with the clothes up to his chin.

"Are you walking in your sleep or insane?" asked Marillac, "or do you

want me to go to work?" he added, as he saw that his friend had some papers in his hand. "You know very well I never have any ideas when fasting, and that I am stupid until noon."

"Get up at once!" said Gerfaut, "I must have a talk with you."

There was something so serious and urgent in Gerfaut's accent as he said these words, that the artist got up at once and hurriedly dressed himself.

"What is the matter?" he asked, as he put on his dressing-gown, "you look as if the affairs of the nation rested upon you."

"Put on your coat and boots," said Octave, "you must go to La Fauconnerie. They are used to seeing you go out early in the morning for your appointments with Reine, and therefore--"

"It is to this shepherdess you would send me!" interrupted the artist, as he began to undress himself; "in that case I will go to bed again. Enough of that!"

"I am to fight with Bergenheim at nine o'clock!" said Gerfaut, in a low voice.

"Stupendous!" exclaimed Marillac, as he jumped back a few steps, and then stood as motionless as a statue. Without wasting any time in unnecessary explanations, his friend gave him a brief account of the night's events.

"Now," said he, "I need you; can I count upon your friendship?"

"In life and in death!" exclaimed Marillac, and he pressed his hand with the emotion that the bravest of men feel at the approach of a danger which threatens one who is dear to them.

"Here," said Gerfaut, as he handed him the papers in his hand, "is a letter for you in which you will find my instructions in full; they will serve you as a guide, according to circumstances. This sealed paper will be deposited by you in the office of the public prosecutor at Nancy, under certain circumstances which my note explains. Finally, this is my will. I have no very near relative; I have made you my heir.

"Listen to me! I do not know a more honest man than you, that is the reason why I select you. First, this legacy is a trust. I speak to you now in case of events which probably will never happen, but which I ought to prepare for. I do not know what effect this may have upon Clemence's fate; her aunt, who is very austere, may quarrel with her and deprive her of her rights; her personal fortune is not very large, I believe, and I know nothing about her marriage settlement. She may thus be entirely at her husband's mercy, and that is what I will not allow. My fortune is therefore a trust that you will hold to be placed at her disposal at any time. I hope that she loves me enough not to refuse this service of me."

"Well and good!" said Marillac; "I will admit that the thought of inheriting from you choked me like a noose around my neck."

"I beg of you to accept for yourself my copyrights as author. You can not refuse that," said Gerfaut, with a half smile; "this legacy belongs to the domain of art. To whom should I leave it if not to you, my Patroclus, my faithful collaborator?"

The artist took several agitated turns about his room.

"To think," he exclaimed, "that I was the one who saved this Bergenheim's life! If he kills you, I shall never forgive myself. And yet, I told you this would end in some tragic manner."

"What business had he there? Is it not so? What can I say? We were seeking for a drama; here it is. I am not anxious on my own account, but on hers. Unhappy woman! A duel is a stone that might fall upon a man's head twenty times a day; it is sufficient for a simpleton if you stare at him, or for an awkward fellow if you tread upon his toes; but on her account--poor angel!--I can not think of it. I need the fullest command of my head and my heart. But it is growing lighter; there is not a moment to lose. Go to the stable; saddle a horse yourself, if there is no servant up; go, as I said, to La Fauconnerie; I have often seen a post-chaise in the tavern courtyard; order it to wait all day at the back of the Montigny plateau. You will find everything explained in detail in the note which I have given you. Here is my purse; I need no money."

Marillac put the purse in his pocket and the papers in his memorandum-book; he then buttoned up his redingote and put on his travelling cap. His countenance showed a state of exaltation which belied, for the time being, the pacific theories he had expounded a few days before.

"You can depend upon me as upon yourself," said he with energy. "If this poor woman calls for my aid, I promise you that I will serve her faithfully. I will take her wherever she wishes; to China, if she asks it, and in spite of the whole police force. If Bergenheim kills you and then follows her up, there will be another duel."

As he said these words, he took his stiletto and a pair of pistols from the mantel and put them in his pocket, after examining the edge of the one and the caps of the others.

"Adieu!" said Gerfaut.

"Adieu!" said the artist, whose extreme agitation contrasted strongly with his friend's calm. "Rest easy! I will look after her--and I will publish a complete edition--But what an idea--to accept a duel as irregular as this! Have you ever seen him use a gun? He had no right to exact this."

"Hurry! you must leave before the servants are up."

"Kiss me, my poor fellow!" said Marillac, with tears in his eyes; "it is

not very manly I know, but I can not help it--Oh! these women! I adore them, of course; but just now I am like Nero, I wish that they all had but one head. It is for these little, worthless dolls that we kill each other!"

"You can curse them on your way," said Gerfaut, who was impatient to see him leave.

"Oh, good gracious, yes! They can flatter themselves this moment that they all inspire me with a deadly hatred."

"Do not make any noise," said his friend, as he carefully opened the door.

Marillac pressed his hand for the last time, and went out. When he reached the end of the corridor, he stopped a moment, then went back.

"Above all things," said he, as he passed his head through the half-open door, "no foolish proceedings. Remember that it is necessary that one of you should fall, and that if you fail; he will not. Take your time--aim --and fire at him as you would at a rabbit."

After this last piece of advice, he went away; ten minutes after he had left, Gerfaut saw him riding out of the courtyard as fast as Beverley's four legs would carry him.

CHAPTER XXV

THE WILD BOAR

The most radiant sun that ever gilded a beautiful September day had arisen upon the castle. The whole valley was as fresh and laughing as a young girl who had just left her bath. The rocks seemed to have a band of silver surrounding them; the woods a mantle of green draped over their shoulders.

There was an unusual excitement in the courtyard of the chateau. The servants were coming and going, the dogs were starting a concert of irregular barks, and the horses were jumping about, sharing their instinctive presentiment and trying to break away from the bridles which held them.

The Baron, seated in his saddle with his usual military attitude, and a cigar in his mouth, went from one to another, speaking in a joking tone which prevented anybody from suspecting his secret thoughts. Gerfaut had imposed upon his countenance that impassible serenity which guards the heart's inner secrets, but had not succeeded so well. His affectation of gayety betrayed continual restraint; the smile which he forced upon his lips left the rest of his face cold, and never removed the wrinkle between his brows. An incident, perhaps sadly longed for, but un hoped

for, increased this gloomy, melancholy expression. Just as the cavalcade passed before the English garden, which separated the sycamore walk from the wing of the chateau occupied by Madame de Bergenheim, Octave slackened the pace of his horse and lingered behind the rest of his companions; his eyes closely examined each of the windows; the blinds of her sleeping-room were only half closed; behind the panes he saw the curtains move and then separate. A pale face appeared for a moment between the blue folds, like an angel who peeps through the sky to gaze upon the earth. Gerfaut raised himself on his stirrups so as to drink in this apparition as long as possible, but he dared not make one gesture of adieu. As he was still endeavoring to obtain one more glance, he saw that the Baron was at his side.

"Play your role better," said he to him; "we are surrounded by spies. De Camier has already made an observation about your preoccupied demeanor."

"You are right," said Octave; "and you join example to advice. I admire your coolness, but I despair of equalling it."

"You must mingle with my guests and talk with them," Christian replied.

He started off at a trot; Gerfaut followed his example, stifling a sigh as he darted a last glance toward the chateau. They soon rejoined the cart which carried several of the hunters, and which Monsieur de Camier drove with the assurance of a professional coachman.

There was a moment's silence, broken only by the trot of the horses and the sound of the wheels upon the level ground.

"What the devil ails your dogs?" exclaimed Monsieur de Camier suddenly, as he turned to the Baron, who was riding behind him. "There they are all making for the river." Just at this moment the dogs, who could be seen in the distance, hurried to the water-side, in spite of all that their leader could do to prevent them. They almost disappeared behind the willows that bordered the river, and one could hear them barking furiously; their barks sounded like rage mingled with terror.

"It is some duck that they have scented," observed the prosecutor.

"They wouldn't bark like that," said Monsieur de Camier, with the sagacity of a professional hunter; "if it were a wolf, they could not make a greater uproar. Is it by chance some wild boar who is taking a bath, in order to receive us more ceremoniously?"

He gave the horses a vigorous blow from the whip, and they all rapidly approached the spot where a scene was taking place which excited to the highest pitch everybody's curiosity. Before they reached the spot, the keeper, who had run after the dogs to call them together, came out of a thicket, waving his hat to stop the hunters, exclaiming:

"A body! a body!"

"A body! a drowned man!" he exclaimed, when the vehicle stopped.

This time it was the public prosecutor who arose and jumped from the cart with the agility of a deer.

"A drowned man!" said he. "In the name of the law, let nobody touch the body. Call back the dogs."

As he said these words he hastened to the spot which the servant pointed out to him. Everybody dismounted and followed him. Octave and Bergenheim had exchanged strange glances when they heard the servant's words.

It was, as the servant had announced, the battered body of a man, thrown by the current against the trunk of the tree, and there caught between two branches of the willow as if in a vise.

"It is the carpenter!" exclaimed Monsieur de Camier as he parted the foliage, which had prevented the head from being seen until then, for he recognized the workman's livid, swollen features. "It is that poor devil of a Lambernier, is it not, Bergenheim?"

"It is true!" stammered Christian, who, in spite of his boldness, could not help turning away his eyes.

"The carpenter!--drowned!--this is frightful!--I never should have recognized him--how disfigured he is!" exclaimed the others, as they pressed forward to gaze at this horrible spectacle.

"This is a sad way to escape justice," observed the notary, in a philosophical tone.

The Baron seized this opening with avidity.

"He must have crossed the river to escape," said he, "and in his haste he made a misstep and fell."

The public prosecutor shook his head with an air of doubt.

"That is not probable," said he; "I know the place. If he tried to cross the river a little above or a little below the rock--it doesn't matter which--the current would have carried him into the little bay above the rock and not here. It is evident that he must have drowned himself or been drowned farther down. I say, been drowned, for you can see that he has a wound upon the left side of his forehead, as if he had received a violent blow, or his head had, hit against a hard substance. Now, if he had been drowned accidentally while crossing the river, he would not have been wounded in this manner."

This remark silenced the Baron; and while the others exhausted conjectures to explain the way in which this tragic event had taken place, he stood motionless, with his eyes fastened upon the river and avoiding a glance at the dead body. During this time the public prosecutor had taken from his pocket some paper and a pen, which he

usually carried with him.

"Gentlemen," said he, seating himself upon the trunk of a tree opposite the drowned man, "two of you will do me the favor to act as witnesses while I draw up my official report. If any of you have a statement to make in regard to this affair, I beg of him to remain here, so that I may receive his deposition."

Nobody stirred, but Gerfaut threw such a penetrating glance at the Baron that the latter turned away his eyes.

"Gentlemen," continued the magistrate, "I do not wish any of you to renounce the sport on account of this untoward incident. There is nothing attractive about this spectacle, and I assure you that if my duty did not keep me here, I should be the first to withdraw. Baron, I beg of you to send me two men and a stretcher in order to have the body carried away; I will have it taken to one of your farms, so as not to frighten the ladies."

"The prosecutor is right," said Christian, whom these words delivered from a terrible anxiety.

After a deliberation, presided over by Monsieur de Camier, the 'tragueurs' and the dogs left in silence to surround the thickets where the animal had been found to be hidden. At the same time the hunters turned their steps in the opposite direction in order to take their positions. They soon reached the ditch alongside of which they were to place themselves. From time to time, as they advanced, one of them left the party and remained mute and motionless like a sentinel at his post. This manoeuvre gradually reduced their numbers, and at last there were only three remaining.

"You remain here, Camier," said the Baron, when they were about sixty steps from the last position.

That gentleman, who knew the ground, was hardly flattered by this proposition.

"By Jove!" said he, "you are on your own grounds; you ought at least to do the honors of your woods and let us choose our own positions. I think you wish to place yourself upon the outskirts, because it is always about that region that the animal first appears; but there will be two of us, for I shall go also."

This determination annoyed Christian considerably, since it threatened to ruin the plan so prudently laid out.

"I am going to put our friend Gerfaut at this post," said he, whispering to the refractory hunter; "I shall be very much pleased if he has an opportunity to fire. What difference does one boar more or less make to an old hunter like you?"

"Well and good; just as you like," retorted Monsieur de Carrier, striking

the ground with the butt-end of his gun, and beginning to whistle in order to cool off his anger.

When the adversaries found themselves side by side and alone, Bergenheim's countenance changed suddenly; the smiling look he had assumed, in order to convince the old hunter of his cheerful disposition, gave place to deep gravity.

"You remember our agreement," he said, as they walked along; "I feel sure that the boar will come in our direction. At the moment when I call out, 'Take care!' I shall expect you to fire; if, at the end of twenty seconds, you have not done so, I warn you that I shall fire myself."

"Very well, Monsieur," said Gerfaut, looking at him fixedly; "you also doubtless remember my words; the discovery of this body will give them still more weight. The public prosecutor has already begun his preliminary proceedings; remember that it depends on me how they shall be completed. The deposition which I spoke to you about is in the hands of a safe person, who is fully instructed to make use of it if necessary."

"Marillac, I suppose," said Christian, in an evil tone; "he is your confidant. It is a fatal secret that you have confided to him, Monsieur. If I survive today, I shall have to secure his silence. May all this blood, past, present, and future, be on your head!"

Deeply affected by this reproach, the Vicomte bowed his head in silence.

"Here is my place," said the Baron, stopping before the trunk of an old oak, "and there is the elm where you are to station yourself."

Gerfaut stopped, and said, in a trembling voice:

"Monsieur, one of us will not leave these woods alive. In the presence of death, one tells the truth. I hope for your peace of mind, and my own, that you will believe my last words. I swear to you, upon my honor and by all that is sacred, that Madame de Bergenheim is innocent."

He bowed, and withdrew from Christian without waiting for a response.

Bergenheim and Gerfaut were out of sight of the others, and stood at their posts with eyes fastened upon each other. The ditch was wide enough to prevent the branches of the trees from troubling them; at the distance of sixty feet, which separated them, each could see his adversary standing motionless, framed by the green foliage. Suddenly, barking was heard in the distance, partially drowned by the firing of a gun. A few seconds later, two feeble reports were heard, followed by an imprecation from Monsieur de Camier, whose caps flashed in the pan. The Baron, who had just leaned forward that he might see better through the thicket, raised his hand to warn Octave to hold himself in readiness. He then placed himself in position. An extreme indecision marked Gerfaut's attitude. After raising his gun, he dropped it to the ground with a despondent gesture, as if his resolution to fire had suddenly abandoned him; the pallor of death could not be more terrible than that

which overspread his features. The howling of the dogs and shouts of the hunters increased. Suddenly another sound was heard. Low, deep growls, followed by the crackling of branches, came from the woods opposite our adversaries. The whole thicket seemed to tremble as if agitated by a storm.

"Take care!" exclaimed Bergenheim, in a firm voice.

At the same moment an enormous head appeared, and the report of a gun was heard. When Gerfaut looked through the smoke caused by his gun, at the farther end of the ditch, nothing was to be seen but the foliage.

The boar, after crossing the clearing, vanished like a flash, leaving behind him a trail of broken branches--and Bergenheim lay behind the trunk of the old oak, upon which large drops of blood had already fallen.

CHAPTER XXVI

BERGENHEIM'S REVENGE

On the same morning the drawing-room of the Bergenheim castle was the theatre of a quiet home scene very much like the one we described at the beginning of this story. Mademoiselle de Corandeuil was seated in her armchair reading the periodicals which had just arrived; Aline was practising upon the piano, and her sister-in-law was seated before one of the windows embroidering. By the calm attitude of these three ladies, and the interest they seemed to show in their several occupations, one would have supposed that they were all equally peaceful at heart. Madame de Bergenheim, upon rising, had resumed her usual habits; she managed to find the proper words to reply when spoken to, her dejection did not differ from her usual melancholy enough for it to become the subject of remark. A rather bright color in her cheeks heightened her beauty; her eyes never had sparkled with more brilliancy; but if a hand had been placed upon her forehead, one would have soon discovered by its burning the secret of all this unwonted color. In fact, in the midst of this sumptuous room, surrounded by her friends, and bending over her embroidery with most exquisite grace, Madame de Bergenheim was slowly dying. A wasting fever was circulating like poison through her veins. She felt that an unheard-of sorrow was hanging over her head, and that no effort of hers could prevent it.

At this very moment, either the man she belonged to or the one she loved was about to die; whatever her widowhood might be, she felt that her mourning would be brief; young, beautiful, surrounded by all the privileges of rank and fortune, life was closing around her, and left but one pathway open, which was full of blood; she would have to bathe her feet in it in order to pass through.

"What is that smoke above the Montigny rock?" Aline exclaimed with surprise; "it looks as if there were a fire in the woods."

Madame de Bergenheim raised her eyes, shivered from head to foot as she saw the stream of smoke which stood out against the horizon, and then let her head droop upon her breast. Mademoiselle de Corandeuil stopped her reading as she heard Aline's remark, and turned slowly to look out of the window.

"That's some of the shepherds' work," said she; "they have built a fire in the bushes at the risk of setting fire to the whole woods. Really, I do not know what to think of your husband, Clemence; he takes everybody away to the hunt with him, and does not leave a soul here to prevent his dwelling from being devastated."

Clemence made no reply, and her sister-in-law, who expected she would say something to keep the conversation alive, returned and seated herself at the piano with a pouting air.

"Thanks, that will do for to-day!" exclaimed the old lady at the first notes; "you have split our heads long enough. You would do better to study your history of France."

Aline closed the piano angrily; but instead of obeying this last piece of advice, she remained seated upon the stool with the sulky air of a pupil in disgrace. A deep silence reigned. Madame de Bergenheim had dropped her embroidery without noticing it. From time to time she trembled as if a chill passed over her, her eyes were raised to watch the smoke ascending above the rock, or else she seemed to listen to some imaginary sound.

"Truly," said Mademoiselle de Corandeuil, as she laid her journal down in her lap, "good morals have made great progress since the July revolution. Yesterday a woman twenty years of age ran away to Montpellier with her lover; to-day, here is another, in Lyons, who poisons her husband and kills herself afterward. If I were superstitious, I should say that the world was coming to an end. What do you think of such atrocious doings, my dear?"

Clemence raised her head with an effort, and answered, in a gloomy voice:

"You must pardon her, since she is dead."

"You are very indulgent," replied the old aunt; "such creatures ought to be burned alive, like the Brinvilliers."

"They often speak in the papers of husbands who kill their wives, but not so often of wives killing their husbands," said Aline, with the partisan feeling natural to the fair sex.

"It is not proper that you should talk of such horrid things," said the old lady, in a severe tone; "behold the fruits of all the morals of the age! It is the effect of all the disgusting stuff that is acted nowadays upon the stage and written in novels. When one thinks of the fine education that is given youth at the present time, it is enough to make

one tremble for the future!"

"Mon Dieu! Mademoiselle, you may be sure that I shall never kill my husband," replied the young girl, to whom this remark seemed particularly addressed.

A stifled groan, which Madame de Bergenheim could not suppress, attracted the attention of the two ladies.

"What is the matter with you?" asked Mademoiselle de Corandeuil, noticing for the first time her niece's dejected air and the frightened expression in her eyes.

"Nothing," murmured the latter; "I think it is the heat of the room."

Aline hastily opened a window, then went and took her sister-in-law's hands in her own.

"You have a fever," said she; "your hands burn and your forehead also; I did not dare tell you, but your beautiful color--"

A frightful cry which Madame de Bergenheim uttered made the young girl draw back in fright.

"Clemence! Clemence!" exclaimed Mademoiselle de Corandeuil, who thought that her niece had gone insane.

"Did you not hear?" she cried, with an accent of terror impossible to describe. She darted suddenly toward the drawing-room door; but, instead of opening it, she leaned against it with arms crossed. Then she ran two or three times around the room in a sort of frenzy, and ended by falling upon her knees before the sofa and burying her head in its cushions.

This scene bewildered the two women. While Mademoiselle de Corandeuil tried to raise Clemence, Aline, still more frightened, ran out of the room to call for aid. A rumor which had just begun to arise in the courtyard was distinctly heard when the door was thrown open. A moment more, and a piercing shriek was heard, and the young girl rushed into the parlor; throwing herself on her knees beside her sister-in-law she pressed her to her breast with convulsive energy.

As she felt herself seized in this fashion, Clemence raised her head and, placing her hands upon Aline's shoulders, she pushed her backward and gazed at her with eyes that seemed to devour her.

"Which? which?" she asked, in a harsh voice.

"My brother--covered with blood!" stammered Aline.

Madame de Bergenheim pushed her aside and threw herself upon the sofa. Her first feeling was a horrible joy at not hearing the name of Octave; but she tried to smother her hysterical utterances by pressing her mouth against the cushion upon which her face was leaning.

A noise of voices was heard in the vestibule; the greatest confusion seemed to reign among the people outside. At last, several men entered the drawing room; at their head was Monsieur de Camier, whose ruddy face had lost all its color.

"Do not be frightened, ladies," said he, in a trembling voice; "do not be frightened. It is only a slight accident, without any danger. Monsieur de Bergenheim was wounded in the hunt," he continued, addressing Mademoiselle de Corandeuil.

At last, the folding-doors were thrown open, and two servants appeared, bearing the Baron upon a mattress.

When the servants had deposited their burden in front of one of the windows, Aline threw herself upon her brother's body, uttering heartrending cries. Madame de Bergenheim did not stir; she lay upon the sofa with eyes and ears buried in the cushions, and seemed deaf and blind to all that surrounded her. Mademoiselle de Corandeuil was the only one who preserved her presence of mind. Controlling her emotion, she leaned over the Baron and sought for some sign of life.

"Is he dead?" she asked, in a low voice, of Monsieur de Camier.

"No, Mademoiselle," replied the latter, in a tone which announced that he had little hope.

"Has a physician been sent for?"

"To Remiremont, Epinal, everywhere."

At this moment Aline uttered a cry of joy. Bergenheim had just stirred, brought to life, perhaps, by the pressure of his sister's arms. He opened his eyes and, closed them several times; at last his energy triumphed over his sufferings; he sat up on his improvised cot and, leaning upon his left elbow, he glanced around the room.

"My wife!" said he, in a weak voice.

Madame de Bergenheim arose and forced her way through the group that surrounded the mattress, and silently took her place beside her husband. Her features had changed so terribly within a few moments that a murmur of pity ran through the group of men that filled the room.

"Take my sister away," said Christian, disengaging his hand from the young girl, who was covering it with kisses and tears.

"My brother! I can not leave my brother!" exclaimed Aline, as she was dragged away rather than led to her room.

"Leave me for a moment," continued the Baron; "I wish to speak to my wife."

Mademoiselle de Corandeuil gave Monsieur de Gamier a questioning glance, as if to ask if it were best to grant this request.

"We can do nothing before the doctors arrive," said the latter, in a low voice, "and perhaps it would be imprudent to oppose him."

Mademoiselle de Corandeuil recognized the correctness of this observation, and left the room, asking the others to follow her. During this time, Madame de Bergenheim remained motionless in her place, apparently insensible to all that surrounded her. The noise of the closing door aroused her from her stupor. She looked around the room as if she were seeking the others; her eyes, which were opened with the fixed look of a somnambulist, did not change their expression when they fell upon her husband.

"Come nearer," said he, "I have not strength enough to speak loud."

She obeyed mechanically. When she saw the large red stain which had soaked Christian's right sleeve, she closed her eyes, threw back her head, and her features contracted with a horrified expression.

"You women are wonderfully fastidious," said the Baron, as he noticed this movement; "you delight in causing a murder, but the slightest scratch frightens you. Pass over to the left side; you will not see so much blood--besides, it is the side where the heart is."

There was something terrible in the irony of the voice in which he spoke at this moment. Clemence fell upon her knees beside him and took his hand, crying

"Pardon! pardon!"

The dying man took away his hand, raised his wife's head, and, looking at her a few moments attentively, he said at last:

"Your eyes are very dry. No tears! What! not one tear when you see me thus!"

"I can not weep," replied she; "I shall die!"

"It is very humiliating for me to be so poorly regretted, and it does you little honor--try to shed a few tears, Madame--it will be remarked--a widow who does not weep!"

"A widow--never!" she said, with energy.

"It would be convenient if they sold tears as they sell crape, would it not? Ah! only you women have a real talent for that--all women know how to weep."

"You will not die, Christian--oh! tell me that you will not die--and that you will forgive me."

"Your lover has killed me," said Bergenheim, slowly; "I have a bullet in my chest--I feel it--I am the one who is to die--in less than an hour I shall be a corpse--don't you see how hard it is already for me to talk?"

In reality his voice was becoming weaker and weaker. His breath grew shorter with each word; a wheezing sound within his chest indicated the extent of the lesion and the continued extravasation of blood.

"Mercy! pardon!" exclaimed the unhappy woman, prostrating herself upon the floor.

"More air--open the windows--" said the Baron, as he fell back upon the mattress, exhausted by the efforts he had just made to talk.

Madame de Bergenheim obeyed his order with the precision of an automaton. A fresh, pure breeze entered the room; when the curtains were raised, floods of light illuminated the floor, and the old portraits, suddenly lighted up, looked like ghosts who had left their graves to witness the death agonies of the last of their descendants. Christian, refreshed by the air which swept over his face, sat up again. He gazed with a melancholy eye at the radiant sun and the green woods which lay stretched out in front of the chateau.

"I lost my father on such a day as this," said he, as if talking to himself--"all our family die during the beautiful weather--ah! do you see that smoke over the Montigny rock?" he exclaimed, suddenly.

After opening the windows, Clemence stepped out upon the balcony. Leaning upon the balustrade, she gazed at the deep, rapid river which flowed at her feet. Her husband's voice calling her aroused her from this gloomy contemplation. When she returned to Christian, his eyes were flaming, a flush like that of fever had overspread his cheeks, and a writhing, furious indignation was depicted upon his face. "Were you looking at that smoke?" said he, angrily; "it is your lover's signal; he is there--he is waiting to take you away--and I, your husband, forbid you to go--you must not leave me--your place is here--close by me."

"Close by you," she repeated, not understanding what he said.

"Wait at least until I am dead," he continued, while his eyes flashed more and more--"let my body get cold--when you are a widow you can do as you like--you will be free--and even then--I forbid it--I order you to wear mourning for me--above all, try to weep--"

"Strike me with a knife! At least I should bleed," said she, bending toward him and tearing open her dress to lay bare her bosom.

He seized her by the arm, and, exerting all his wasting strength to reach her, he said, in a voice whose harshness was changed almost into supplication:

"Clemence, do not dishonor me by giving yourself to him when I am dead--I would curse you if I thought that you would do that."

"Oh! do not curse me!" she exclaimed; "do not drive me mad. Do you not know that I am about to die?"

"There are women who do not see their husband's blood upon their lover's hands--but I would curse you--"

He dropped Clemence's arm and fell back upon the mattress with a sob. His eyes closed, and some unintelligible words died on his lips, which were covered with a bloody froth. He was dying.

Madame de Bergenheim, crouched down upon the floor, heard him repeating in his expiring voice:

"I would curse you--I would curse you!"

She remained motionless for some time, her eyes fastened upon the dying man before her with a look of stupefied curiosity. Then she arose and went to the mirror; she gazed at herself for a moment as if obeying the whim of an insane woman, pushing aside, in order to see herself better, the hair which covered her forehead. Suddenly a flash of reason came to her; she uttered a horrible cry as she saw some blood upon her face; she looked at herself from head to foot; her dress was stained with it; she wrung her hands in horror, and felt that they were wet. Her husband's blood was everywhere. Then, her brain filled with the fire of raving madness, she rushed out upon the balcony, and Bergenheim, before his last breath escaped him, heard the noise of her body as it fell into the river.

Several days later, the *Sentinelle des Vosges* contained the following paragraph, written with the official sorrow found in all death-notices at thirty sous per line

"A frightful event, which has just thrown two of our best families into mourning, has caused the greatest consternation throughout the Remiremont district. Monsieur le Baron de Bergenheim, one of the richest land-owners in our province, was killed by accident at a wild-boar hunt on his own domains. It was by the hand of one of his best friends, Monsieur de Gerfaut, well known by his important literary work, which has given its author a worldwide reputation, that he received his death-blow. Nothing could equal the grief of the involuntary cause of this catastrophe. Madame de Bergenheim, upon learning of this tragic accident, was unable to survive the death of her adored husband, and drowned herself in her despair. Thus the same grave received this couple, still in the bloom of life, to whom their great mutual affection seemed to promise a most happy future."

Twenty-eight months later the Parisian journals, in their turn, inserted, with but slight variations, the following article:

"Nothing could give any idea of the enthusiasm manifested at the Theatre-Francais last evening, at the first representation of Monsieur de Gerfaut's new drama. Never has this writer, whose silence literature has

deplored for too long a time, distinguished himself so highly. His early departure for the East is announced. Let us hope that this voyage will turn to the advantage of art, and that the beautiful and sunny countries of Asia will be a mine for new inspirations for this celebrated poet, who has taken, in such a glorious manner, his place at the head of our literature."

Bergenheim's last wish had been realized; his honor was secure; nobody outraged by even an incredulous smile the purity of Clemence's winding-sheet; and the world did not refuse to their double grave the commonplace consideration that had surrounded their lives.

Clemence's death did not destroy the future of the man who loved her so passionately, but the mourning he wears for her, to this day, is of the kind that is never put aside. And, as the poet's heart was always reflected in his works, the world took part in this mourning without being initiated into its mystery. When the bitter cup of memory overflowed in them, they believed it to be a new vein which had opened in the writer's brain. Octave received, every day, congratulations upon this sadly exquisite tone of his lyre, whose vibrations surpassed in supreme intensity the sighs of Rene or Obermann's Reveries. Nobody knew that those sad pages were written under the inspiration of the most mournful of visions, and that this dark and melancholy tinge, which was taken for a caprice of the imagination, had its source in blood and in the spasms of a broken heart.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Attractive abyss of drunkenness
Obstinacy of drunkenness

End of this Project Gutenberg Etext of Gerfaut, v4
by Charles de Bernard

v4

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