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"Kill me and me alone, for I alone am guilty"

File Number 113

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THE LECOQ EDITION

File Number 113

&

The Little Old Man of Batignolles

& Other Tales

By EMILE GABORIAU

Frontispiece from a painting by
John A. Williams

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I

FILE NUMBER 113

IN the Paris journals of February 28, 186--, there appeared the following intelligence:

"A daring robbery, committed during the night at one of our principal banker's, M. Andre Fauvel, has created great excitement this morning in the neighborhood of the Rue de Provence. The thieves, who were as skilful as they were daring, succeeded in effecting an entrance to the bank, in forcing the lock of a safe that has heretofore been considered impregnable, and in possessing themselves of bank-notes of the value of three hundred and fifty thousand francs. The police, immediately informed of the robbery, displayed their accustomed zeal, and their efforts have been crowned with success. Already, it is said, P. B., a clerk in the bank, has been arrested, and there is every reason to hope that his accomplices will be speedily overtaken by the hand of justice."

For four days this robbery was the talk of Paris. Then public attention was engrossed by later and equally interesting events: an acrobat broke his leg at the circus; an actress made her debut at a minor theatre; and news of the 28th was soon forgotten.

But for once the newspapers were—perhaps designedly—wrong, or at least inaccurate in their information. The sum of three hundred and fifty thousand francs had certainly been stolen from M. Andre Fauvel's bank, but not in the manner described. A clerk had also been arrested on suspicion, but no conclusive proof had been forthcoming against him. This robbery of unusual importance remained, if not inexplicable, at least unexplained.

The following are the facts of the case as related with scrupulous exactitude in the official police report.

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II

THE banking-house of M. Andre Fauvel, No. 87 Rue de Provence, is a noted establishment, and, owing to its large staff of clerks, presents very much the appearance of a government department. On the ground-floor are the offices, with windows opening on the street, protected by iron bars sufficiently strong and close together to discourage all attempts at effecting an entrance. A large glass door opens into a spacious vestibule, where three or four messengers are always in waiting. On the right are the rooms to which the public is admitted, and from which a narrow passageway leads to the head cashier's office. The offices of the corresponding clerks, the ledger-keeper, and general accounts are on the left. At the farther end is a small glazed court with which seven or eight small wickets communicate. These are kept closed, except only on particular days when a considerable number of payments have to be made, and then they are indispensable. M. Fauvel's private office is on the first floor over the general offices, and leads into his handsome private apartments. This office communicates directly with the bank by means of a dark, narrow staircase, which opens into the room occupied by the head cashier. This latter room is completely proof against all burglarious attacks, no matter how ingeniously planned; indeed, it could almost withstand a regular siege, sheeted as it is like a monitor. The doors and the partition in which the wicket is where payments are made are covered with thick iron plates; and a heavy grating protects the fireplace. Fastened in the wall by enormous iron clamps is a safe, a formidable and fantastic piece of furniture, calculated to fill with envy the poor devil who carries his fortune easily enough in a pocket-book. This safe, considered the masterpiece of the well-known house of Becquet, is six feet in height and four and a half in width, and is made entirely of wrought iron, with triple sides, and divided into isolated compartments in case of fire.

The safe is opened by a curious little key, which is, however,

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the least important part of the mechanism. Five movable steel buttons, upon which are engraved all the letters of the alphabet, constitute the real power of the ingenious lock. To open the safe it is requisite, before inserting the key, to replace the letters on the buttons in the same order in which they were when the door was locked. In M. Fauvel's bank, as elsewhere, it was always closed with a word that was changed from time to time. This word was known only to the head of the bank and the chief cashier, each of whom had a key to the safe. In such a stronghold, a person might deposit more diamonds than the Duke of Brunswick possessed, and sleep well assured, as he would be, of their safety. But one danger seemed to threaten —that of forgetting the secret word which was the "Open, sesame" of the iron barrier.

About half-past nine o'clock on the morning of the 28th of February, the bank clerks were all busy at their various desks, when a middle-aged man of dark complexion and military air, clad in deep mourning, appeared in the office adjoining that of the head cashier, and expressed a desire to see him.

He was told that the cashier had not arrived, and his attention was called to a placard in the entry, which stated that the cashier's office opened at ten o'clock.

This reply seemed to disconcert the newcomer. "I expected," he said, in a tone of cool impertinence, "to find some one here ready to attend to my business. I explained the matter to M. Fauvel yesterday. I am Comte Louis de Clameran, owner of iron-works at Oloron, and have come to receive three hundred thousand francs deposited in this bank by my late brother, whose heir I am. It is surprising that no instructions have been given about it."

Neither the title of the noble manufacturer nor his remarks appeared to have the slightest effect upon the clerks. "The head cashier has not yet arrived," they repeated, "and we can do nothing for you."

"Then conduct me to M. Fauvel."

There was a moment's hesitancy; then a clerk, named Cavaillon, who was writing by the window, said: "The chief is always out at this hour."

"I will call again, then," replied M. de Clameran. And he walked out, as he had entered, without saying "Good morning," or even raising his hat.

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"Not overpolite, that customer," said little Cavaillon; "but he is unlucky, for here comes Prosper."

Prosper Bertomy, head cashier of Fauvel's banking-house, was a tall, handsome man, of about thirty, with fair hair and large dark blue eyes, fastidiously neat in appearance, and dressed in the height of fashion. He would have been very prepossessing but for a cold, reserved English-like manner, and a certain air of self-sufficiency, which spoiled his naturally bright and open countenance.

"Ah, here you are!" cried Cavaillon. "Some one has just been inquiring for you."

"Who? An ironmaster, was it not?"

"Precisely."

"Well, he will come again. Knowing that I should be late this morning, I made all my arrangements yesterday." Prosper had unlocked his office door, and, as he finished speaking, entered, and closed it behind him.

"Good!" exclaimed one of the clerks; "there is a man who never lets anything disturb him. The chief has quarreled with him twenty times for always coming late, and his remonstrances have no more effect upon him than a breath of wind."

"And quite right, too; he knows he can get anything he wants out of the chief."

"Besides, how could he come any sooner? A man who sits up all night, and leads a fast life, doesn't feel inclined for work early in the morning. Did you notice how pale he looked when he came in?"

"He must have been playing heavily again. Couturier says he lost fifteen hundred francs at a sitting last week."

"His work is none the worse done for all that," interrupted Cavaillon. "If you were in his place—"

He stopped short. The door of the cashier's office suddenly opened, and the cashier appeared before them with tottering step, and a wild, haggard look on his ashy pale face. "Robbed!" he gasped out; "I have been robbed!"

Prosper's horrified expression, his hollow voice and trembling limbs, so alarmed the clerks that they jumped off their stools and ran toward him. He almost dropped into their arms; he was sick and faint, and sank into a chair. His companions surrounded him, and begged him to explain himself. "Robbed?" they said; "where, how, by whom?"

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Gradually, Prosper recovered himself. "All the money that was in the safe," he said, "has been stolen."

"All?"

"Yes, all; three rolls, each containing one hundred notes of a thousand francs, and one roll of fifty thousand. The four were wrapped in a sheet of paper and tied together."

With the rapidity of lightning, the news of the robbery spread throughout the banking-house, and the room was soon filled with curious inquirers.

"Tell us, Prosper," said young Cavaillon, "has the safe been broken open?"

"No; it is just as I left it."

"Well, then, how could—"

"All I know is that yesterday I placed three hundred and fifty thousand francs in the safe, and this morning they are gone."

A deep silence ensued, which was at length broken by an old clerk, who did not seem to share the general affright. "Don't distress yourself, M. Bertomy," he said; "no doubt the chief has disposed of the money."

The unhappy cashier started up with a look of relief; he eagerly caught at the suggestion. "Yes!" he exclaimed, "it must be as you say; the chief must have taken it." But, after thinking a few minutes, he remarked in a tone of deep depression: "No, that is impossible. During the five years I have had charge of the safe, M. Fauvel has never opened it excepting in my presence. Whenever he has needed money, he has either waited until I came, or has sent for me, rather than take it in my absence."

"Well," said Cavaillon, "before despairing, let us ascertain the truth."

But a messenger had already informed M. Fauvel of the robbery, and as Cavaillon was about to go in search of him, he entered the office.

M. Andre Fauvel appeared to be a man of fifty, inclined to corpulency, of medium height, with iron-gray hair; and, like all hard workers, he had a slight stoop. Never did he by a single action belie the kindly expression of his face. He had a frank air, a lively, intelligent eye, and full, red lips. Born in the neighborhood of Aix, he betrayed, when animated, a slight Provencal accent that gave a peculiar flavor to his genial humor. The news of the robbery had extremely agitated him, for his usually florid face was now quite pale. "What is this

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I hear? what has happened?" he said to the clerks, who respectfully stood aside when he entered the office.

The sound of M. Fauvel's voice inspired the cashier with the factitious energy called forth by a great crisis. The dreaded and decisive moment had come; he arose, and advanced toward his chief. "Sir," he said, "having, as you know, a payment to make this morning, I yesterday drew from the Bank of France three hundred and fifty thousand francs."

"Why yesterday?" interrupted the banker. "I think I have a hundred times desired you to wait until the day payment has to be made."

"I know it, sir, and I did wrong to disobey you. But the mischief is done. Yesterday evening I locked the money up: it has disappeared, and yet the safe has not been broken open."

"You must be mad!" exclaimed M. Fauvel; "you are dreaming!"

These few words crushed all hope; but the horror of the situation imparted to Prosper, not the coolness of a steadied resolution, but that sort of stupid, stolid indifference which often results from unexpected catastrophes. It was with apparent calmness that he replied: "I am not mad; neither, unfortunately, am I dreaming; I am simply telling the truth."

This tranquillity at such a moment appeared to exasperate M. Fauvel. He seized Prosper by the arm, and shook him roughly. "Speak!" he exclaimed; "speak! who can have opened the safe?"

"I can not say."

"No one but you and I knows the secret word. No one but you and I possesses a key."

This was a formal accusation; at least, all the auditors present so understood it. Yet Prosper's strange calmness never left him for an instant. He quietly released himself from M. Fauvel's grasp, and slowly said: "In other words, sir, it is only I who could have taken this money—"

"Miserable man!" exclaimed M. Fauvel.

Prosper drew himself up to his full height, and, looking M. Fauvel full in the face, added: "Or you!"

The banker made a threatening gesture; and there is no knowing what would have happened if he had not been interrupted by loud and angry voices in the hall. A man insisted upon entering despite the protestations of the messengers, and succeeded in forcing his way in. It was M. de Clameran.

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The clerks stood looking on, bewildered and inert. The silence was profound and solemn. It was easy to perceive that some terrible issue was being anxiously weighed by all these men.

The ironmaster did not appear to observe anything unusual. He advanced, and without lifting his hat said, in his former impertinent tone: "It is after ten o'clock, gentlemen."

No one answered; and M. de Clameran was about to continue, when turning round, he for the first time saw the banker, and, walking up to him, exclaimed: "Well, sir, I congratulate myself upon finding you in at last. I have been here once before this morning, and found the cashier's office not opened, the cashier not arrived, and you absent."

"You are mistaken, sir, I was in my office."

"At any rate, I was told you were out; that gentleman there assured me of the fact." And the ironmaster pointed out Cavaillon. "However, that is of little importance," he went on to say. "I return, and this time not only the cashier's office is closed, but I am refused admittance to the banking-house, and find myself compelled to force my way in. Be so good as to tell me whether I can have my money."

M. Fauvel's pale face turned red with anger as he listened to this harangue; yet he controlled himself. "I should be obliged to you, sir," he said in a low voice, "for a short delay."

"I thought you told me—"

"Yes, yesterday. But this morning—this very instant—I find I have been robbed of three hundred and fifty thousand francs."

M. de Clameran bowed ironically, and asked: "Shall I have to wait long?"

"Long enough for me to send to the Bank of France."

Then, turning his back on the iron-founder, M. Fauvel said to his cashier: "Write a check and send to the bank at once to draw out all the available money. Let the messenger take a cab." Prosper remained motionless. "Do you hear me?" inquired the banker in an angry voice.

The cashier started; he seemed as if awakening from a dream. "It is useless to send," he said in a slow, measured tone: "this gentleman requires three hundred thousand francs, and there is less than one hundred thousand at the bank."

M. de Clameran appeared to expect this answer, for he muttered: "Of course." Although he only pronounced these words, his voice, his manner, his countenance clearly said: "This

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comedy is well acted; but nevertheless it is a comedy, and I don't intend to be duped by it."

Alas! After Prosper's answer, and the ironmaster's coarsely expressed opinion, the clerks knew not what to think. The fact was, that Paris had just been startled by several financial crashes. The thirst for speculation had caused the oldest and stanchest houses to totter. Men of the most unimpeachable honor had to sacrifice their pride, and go from door to door imploring aid. Credit, that rare bird of security and peace, rested with none, but stood, with upraised wings, ready to fly off at the first suggestion of suspicion.

This idea of a comedy arranged beforehand between the banker and his cashier might therefore readily occur to the minds of people who, if not suspicious, were at least aware of all the expedients resorted to by speculators in order to gain time, which with them often meant salvation.

M. Fauvel had had too much knowledge of mankind not to instantly divine the impression produced by Prosper's answer; he read the most mortifying doubt on the faces around him. "Don't be alarmed, sir," said he to M. de Clameran, "this house has other resources. Be kind enough to await my return."

He left the office, went up to his private room, and in a few minutes returned, holding in his hand a letter and a bundle of securities. "Here, quick, Couturier!" he said to one of his clerks, "take my carriage, which is waiting at the door, and go with this gentleman to M. de Rothschild. Hand the latter this letter and these securities; in exchange, you will receive three hundred thousand francs, which give to M. de Clameran."

The ironmaster was visibly disappointed; he seemed desirous of apologizing for his rudeness. "I assure you," said he to M. Fauvel, "that I had no intention of giving offense. Our relations, for some years, have been such that I hope—"

"Enough, sir," interrupted the banker, "I desire no apologies. In business, friendship counts for nothing. I owe you money: I am not ready to pay: you are pressing: you have a perfect right to demand what is your own. Accompany my messenger: he will pay you your money." Then he turned to his clerks, who stood curiously gazing on, and said: "As for you, gentlemen, be good enough to resume your places at your desks."

In an instant the office was cleared of every one excepting the clerks who habitually occupied it; and they resumed their seats at their desks with their noses almost touching the paper

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before them, as if they were too engrossed in their work to think of anything else.

Still excited by the events which had rapidly succeeded each other, M. Andre Fauvel walked up and down the room with quick, nervous steps, occasionally uttering some half-stifled exclamation. Prosper had remained leaning against the partition, with pale face and fixed eyes, looking as if he had lost the faculty of thinking or of acting. Presently the banker, after a long silence, stopped short before him; he had determined upon the line of conduct he would pursue. "We must have an explanation," he said. "Go into your office."

The cashier mechanically obeyed; and his chief followed him, taking the precaution to close the door after them. The room bore no evidences of a successful burglary. Everything was in perfect order; not even a paper was disturbed. The safe was open, and on the top shelf lay several rouleaus of gold, overlooked or disdained by the thieves.

M. Fauvel, without troubling himself to examine anything, took a seat, and ordered his cashier to do the same. He had quite recovered his equanimity, and his countenance wore its usual kind expression. "Now that we are alone, Prosper," he said, "have you nothing to tell me?"

The cashier started, as if surprised at the question. "Nothing, sir, that I have not already told you," he replied.

"What! nothing? Do you persist in maintaining an attitude so absurd and ridiculous that no one can possibly give you credence? It is sheer folly? Confide in me: it is your only chance of salvation. I am your employer, it is true; but I am before and above all your friend—your best and truest friend. I can not forget that in this very room, fifteen years ago, you were intrusted to me by your father; and ever since that day I have had cause to congratulate myself on possessing so faithful and efficient a clerk. Yes, it is fifteen years since you came to me. I was then just commencing the foundation of my fortune. You have seen it gradually grow, step by step, from almost nothing to its present magnitude. As my wealth increased, I endeavored to better your condition; you who, although so young, are the oldest of my clerks. At each augmentation of my fortune I increased your salary."

Never had the cashier heard M. Fauvel express himself in so feeling and paternal a manner. Prosper was silent with astonishment.

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"Answer," persued M. Fauvel, "have I not always been like a father to you? From the first day, my house has been open to you; you were treated as a member of my family; my niece Madeleine and my sons looked upon you as a brother. But you grew weary of this peaceful life. One day, a year ago, you suddenly began to shun us; and since then—"

The memories of the past thus called up by the banker seemed too much for the unhappy cashier; he buried his face in his hands, and wept bitterly.

"A man can confide everything to his father," resumed M. Fauvel, also deeply affected. "Fear nothing. A father not only pardons, he forgets. Do I not know the temptations that beset a young man in a city like Paris? There are some inordinate desires before which the firmest principles will give way, and which so pervert our moral sense as to render us incapable of judging between right and wrong. Speak, Prosper, speak!"

"What do you wish me to say?"

"The truth. When an honorable man yields, in an hour of weakness, to temptation, his first step toward atonement is confession. Say to me: 'Yes, I have been tempted, dazzled: the sight of these piles of gold turned my brain. I am young: I have passions.'"

"I!" murmured Prosper, "I!"

"Poor boy," said the banker sadly; "do you think I am ignorant of the life you have been leading since you left my roof a year ago? Can you not understand that all your fellow clerks are jealous of you? that they do not forgive you for earning twelve thousand francs a year? Never have you committed a piece of folly without my being immediately informed of it by an anonymous letter. I could tell you the exact number of nights you have spent at the gaming-table, and the money you have squandered. Oh, envy has keen eyes and a quick ear! I have great contempt for these cowardly denunciations, but was forced, not only to heed them, but to make inquiries myself. It is only proper that I should know what sort of life is led by the man to whom I intrust my fortune and my honor."

Prosper seemed about to protest against this last speech.

"Yes, my honor," insisted M. Fauvel, in a voice that a sense of humiliation made unsteady; "yes, my credit, which might have been compromised to-day by this M. de Clameran. Do you know how much I shall lose by paying him this money? And suppose I had not had the securities which I have sacrificed? you did not know I possessed them."

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The banker paused, as if hoping for a confession, which, however, did not come.

"Come, Prosper, have courage, be frank! I will go upstairs. You will look again in the safe; I am sure that in your agitation you did not search it thoroughly. This evening I will return, and I am confident that, during the day, you will have found, if not the three hundred and fifty thousand francs, at least the greater portion of the amount; and to-morrow neither you nor I will remember anything about this false alarm."

M. Fauvel had risen, and was about to leave the room when Prosper arose, and seized him by the arm. "Your generosity is useless, sir," he said bitterly; "having taken nothing I can restore nothing. I have made a scrupulous search; the bank-notes have been stolen."

"But by whom, poor fool? by whom?"

"By all that is sacred, I swear that it was not by me."

The banker's face turned crimson. "Miserable wretch!" cried he, "do you mean to say that I took the money?"

Prosper bowed his head, and did not answer.

"Ah! it is thus, then," said M. Fauvel, unable to contain himself any longer, "you dare— Then between you and me, M. Prosper Bertomy, justice shall decide. God is my witness that I have done all I could to save you. You will have yourself to thank for what follows. I have sent for the commissary of police; he must be waiting in my room. Shall I call him down?"

Prosper, with the fearful resignation of a man who entirely abandons himself, replied in a stifled voice: "Do as you will."

The banker was near the door, which he opened, and, after giving the cashier a last searching look, called to an office boy: "Anselm, bid the commissary of police to step down."

III

IF there is one man in the world whom no event should move or surprise, always on his guard against deceptive appearances, capable of admitting everything and explaining everything, it certainly is a Parisian commissary of police.

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While the judge, from his lofty seat, applies the Code to the facts submitted to him, the commissary of police observes and watches all the odious circumstances the law can not reach. He is, in spite of himself, the confidant of disgraceful details, domestic crimes, and tolerated vices.

If, when he entered upon his office, he had any illusions, before the end of a year they would all be dissipated. If he does not absolutely despise the human race, it is because often, side by side with abominations indulged in with impunity, he discovers sublime generosities which remain unrewarded. He sees impudent villains filching the public respect; and he consoles himself by thinking of the modest, obscure heroes whom he has also encountered.

So often have his forecasts been deceived, that he has reached a state of complete skepticism. He believes in nothing, neither in evil nor in absolute good; not more in virtue than in vice. His experience has forced him to come to the drear conclusion, that not men, but events, are worth considering.

The commissary sent for by M. Fauvel soon made his appearance. It was with a calm air, if not one of perfect indifference, that he entered the office. He was followed by a short man dressed in a full suit of black, which was slightly relieved by a ruffled collar.

The banker, scarcely bowing, said to the commissary: "Doubtless, sir, you have been apprised of the painful circumstances which compel me to have recourse to your assistance?"

"It is about a robbery, I believe."

"Yes; an infamous and mysterious robbery committed in this office, from the safe you see open there, of which my cashier" (he pointed to Prosper) "alone possesses the key and the word."

This declaration seemed to arouse the unfortunate cashier from his dull stupor. "Excuse me, sir," he said to the commissary in a low tone. "My chief also has the word and the key."

"Of course, that is understood."

The commissary at once drew his own conclusions. Evidently these two men accused each other. From their own statements, one or the other was guilty. One was the head of an important bank; the other was simply the cashier. One was the chief; the other the clerk. But the commissary of police was too well skilled in concealing his impressions to betray his thoughts by any visible sign. Not a muscle of his face moved. Yet he

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became more grave, and alternately watched the cashier and M. Fauvel, as if trying to draw some satisfactory conclusion from their behavior.

Prosper was very pale and dejected. He had dropped into a seat, and his arms hung inert on either side of the chair. The banker, on the contrary, remained standing with flashing eyes and crimson face, expressing himself with extraordinary vehemence. "The importance of the theft is immense," continued he; "there is missing a fortune, three hundred and fifty thousand francs! This robbery might have had the most disastrous consequences. In times like these, the want of this sum might compromise the credit of the wealthiest banking-house in Paris."

"I believe so, if bills were falling due."

"Well, sir, I have this very day a heavy payment to make."

"Ah, really!" There was no mistaking the commissary's tone; a suspicion, the first, had evidently entered his mind.

The banker understood it; he started, and added quickly: "I met my engagements, but at the cost of a disagreeable sacrifice. I ought to add further, that if my orders had been obeyed, the three hundred and fifty thousand francs would not have been here."

"How is that?"

"I desire never to have large sums of money in my house overnight. My cashier had positive orders invariably to wait until the last moment before drawing money from the Bank of France. I forbade him, above all, to leave large sums of money in the safe overnight."

"You hear this?" said the commissary to Prosper.

"Yes, sir," replied the cashier, "M. Fauvel's statement is quite correct."

After this explanation, the suspicions of the commissary, instead of being strengthened, were dissipated. "Well," he said, "a robbery has been perpetrated, but by whom? Did the robber enter from without?"

The banker hesitated a moment. "I think not," he said at last.

"And I am certain he did not," said Prosper.

The commissary expected and was prepared for these answers; but it did not suit his purpose to follow them up immediately. "However," said he, "we must make ourselves sure of it." Turning toward his companion—"M. Fanferlot," he said, "go and see if you can discover any traces that may have escaped the attention of these gentlemen."

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M. Fanferlot, nicknamed "the squirrel," was indebted to his prodigious agility for his title, of which he was not a little proud. Slim and insignificant in appearance, in spite of his iron muscles, he might be taken for the under clerk of a bailiff as he walked along buttoned up to the chin in his thin black overcoat. He had one of those faces that impress one disagreeably—an odiously turned-up nose, thin lips, and little restless black eyes.

Fanferlot, who had been in the detective force for five years, burned to distinguish himself. He was ambitious. Alas! he was unsuccessful, lacking opportunity—or genius. Already, before the commissary spoke to him, he had ferreted everywhere; studied the doors, sounded the partitions, examined the wicket, and stirred up the ashes in the grate. "I can not imagine," said he, "how a stranger could have effected an entrance here." He walked round the office. "Is this door closed at night?" he inquired.

"It is always locked."

"And who keeps the key?"

"The watchman," said Prosper, "to whom I always gave it in charge before leaving the bank."

"And who," said M. Fauvel, "sleeps in the outer room on a folding-beadstead, which he unfolds at night, and folds up in the morning."

"Is he here now?" inquired the commissary.

"Yes," replied the banker, and he opened the door, and called: "Anselme!"

This man was the favored servant of M. Fauvel, and had lived with him for ten years. He knew that he would not be suspected; but the idea of being connected in any way with a robbery was too much for him, and he entered the door trembling like a leaf.

"Did you sleep in the next room last night?" asked the commissary.

"Yes, sir, as usual."

"At what hour did you go to bed?"

"About half-past ten; I had spent the evening at a cafe near by, with master's valet."

"Did you hear no noise during the night?"

"Not a sound; and still I sleep so lightly, that if M. Fauvel comes down to the cashier's office when I am asleep, I am instantly aroused by the sound of his footsteps."

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"M. Fauvel often comes to the cashier's office at night, does he?"

"No, sir; very seldom."

"Did he come last night?"

"No, sir, I am very certain he did not; for I was kept awake nearly all night by the strong coffee I had drunk with the valet."

"That will do; you can retire," said the commissary.

When Anselme had left the room, Fanferlot resumed his search. He opened the door of the private staircase. "Where do these stairs lead to?" he asked.

"To my private office," replied M. Fauvel.

"Is not that the room whither I was conducted when I first arrived?" inquired the commissary.

"The same."

"I should like to see it," said Fanferlot, "and examine the entrance to it."

"Nothing is easier," said M. Fauvel eagerly; "follow me, gentlemen. And you too, Prosper."

M. Fauvel's private office consisted of two rooms, the waiting-room, sumptuously furnished and elaborately decorated, and the inner one where he transacted business. The furniture in this room was composed of a large office-table, several leather-covered chairs, and on either side of the fireplace a secretary and a bookshelf.

These two rooms had only three doors; one opened on the private staircase, another into the banker's bedroom, and the third on to the landing. It was through this latter door that the banker's clients and visitors were admitted.

M. Fanferlot examined the room at a glance. He seemed puzzled, like a man who had flattered himself with the hope of discovering some clue and had found nothing. "Let us see the other side," he said. He passed into the waiting-room, followed by the banker and the commissary of police.

Prosper remained behind. Despite the confused state of his mind, he could not but notice that the situation was for him momentarily becoming more serious. He had demanded and accepted the contest with his chief; the struggle had commenced, and now it no longer depended upon his own will to arrest the consequences of his action. They were about to engage in a bitter conflict, utilizing all weapons, until one of the two should succumb, the loss of honor being the price of defeat.

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In the eyes of justice who would be the innocent man? Alas! the unfortunate cashier saw only too clearly that the chances were terribly unequal, and he was overwhelmed with the sense of his own inferiority. Never had he thought that his chief would carry out his threats; for in a contest of this nature, M. Fauvel would have as much at stake as his cashier, and more to lose.

Prosper was sitting near the fireplace, absorbed in the most gloomy forebodings, when the banker's bedroom door suddenly opened, and a lovely girl appeared upon the threshold. She was tall and slender; a loose morning robe, confined at the waist by a simple black ribbon, betrayed to advantage the graceful elegance of her figure. Her dark eyes were large and soft; her complexion had the creamy pallor of a white camellia; and her beautiful black hair, carelessly held together by a tortoise-shell comb, fell in a profusion of soft curls upon her finely shaped neck. She was Madeleine, M. Fauvel's niece, of whom he had spoken not long before. Seeing Prosper in the room, where probably she had expected to find her uncle alone, she could not refrain from an exclamation of surprise: "Ah!"

Prosper started up as if he had received an electric shock. His eyes, a moment before so dull and heavy, now sparkled with joy, as if he had caught a glimpse of an angel of hope. "Madeleine!" he cried, "Madeleine!"

The young girl was blushing crimson. She seemed about to hastily retreat, and stepped back; but Prosper having advanced toward her, she was overcome by a sentiment stronger than her will, and extended her hand, which he took and pressed with great respect. They stood thus face to face, but with averted looks, as if they dared not let their eyes meet for fear of betraying their feelings; having much to say, and not knowing how to begin, they stood silent. Finally Madeleine murmured in a scarcely audible voice: "You, Prosper—you!"

These words broke the spell. The cashier dropped the white hand which he held, and answered bitterly: "Yes, I am Prosper, the companion of your childhood—suspected, accused of the most disgraceful theft; Prosper, whom your uncle has just delivered up to justice, and who, before the day has gone by, will be arrested and thrown into prison."

Madeleine, with a terrified gesture, cried in a tone of anguish: "Good heavens! Prosper, what are you saying?"

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"What! mademoiselle, do you not know what has happened? Have not your aunt and cousins told you?"

"They have told me nothing. I have scarcely seen my cousins this morning; and my aunt is so ill that I felt uneasy, and came to tell my uncle. But for heaven's sake, speak: tell me the cause of your distress."

Prosper hesitated. Perhaps it occurred to him to open his heart to Madeleine, of revealing to her his most secret thoughts. A remembrance of the past checked his confidence. He sadly shook his head, and replied: "Thanks, mademoiselle, for this proof of interest, the last, doubtless, that I shall ever receive from you; but allow me, by being silent, to spare you distress, and myself the mortification of blushing before you."

Madeleine interrupted him imperiously: "I insist upon knowing," she said.

"Alas! mademoiselle," answered Prosper, "you will only too soon learn my misfortune and disgrace; then, yes then, you will applaud yourself for what you have done."

She became more urgent; instead of commanding she entreated; but Prosper was inflexible. "Your uncle is in the adjoining room, with the commissary of police and a detective," said he. "They will soon return. I entreat you to retire that they may not find you here." As he spoke he gently pushed her through the door, and closed it upon her.

It was time, for the next moment the commissary and M. Fauvel entered. They had visited the main entrance and the waiting-room, and had heard nothing of what had passed. But Fanferlot had heard for them. This excellent bloodhound had not lost sight of the cashier. He said to himself: "Now that my young gentleman believes himself to be alone, his face will betray him. I shall detect a smile or a gesture that will enlighten me."

Leaving M. Fauvel and the commissary to pursue their investigations, he posted himself to watch. He saw the door open, and Madeleine appear upon the threshold; he lost not a single word or gesture of the rapid scene which had passed. It mattered little that every word of this scene was an enigma. M. Fanferlot was skilful enough to complete the sentences he did not understand. As yet he only had a suspicion; but a mere suspicion is better than nothing; it is a point to start from. So ready was he in building a plan upon the slightest incident, that he thought he saw in the past of these people,

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who were utter strangers to him, glimpses of a domestic drama. If the commissary of police is a skeptic, the detective has faith, he believes in evil. "I understand the case now," said he to himself. "This man loves the young lady, who is really very pretty; and, as he is handsome, I suppose his love is reciprocated. This love affair vexes the banker, who, not knowing how to get rid of the importunate lover by fair means, has to resort to foul, and plans this imaginary robbery, which is very ingenious."

Thus, to M. Fanferlot's mind, the banker had simply robbed himself, and the innocent cashier was the victim of a vile machination. But this conviction was at present of little service to Prosper. Fanferlot, the ambitious man, who had determined to obtain renown in his profession, decided to keep his conjectures to himself. "I will let the others go their way, and I'll go mine," he said. "When, by dint of close watching and patient investigation, I shall have collected proof sufficient to insure certain conviction I will unmask the scoundrel."

He was radiant. He had at last found the crime, so long looked for, which would make him celebrated. Nothing was wanting, neither the odious circumstances, nor the mystery, nor even the romantic and sentimental element represented by Prosper and Madeleine. Success seemed difficult, almost impossible; but Fanferlot, "the squirrel," had great confidence in his own genius for investigation.

Meanwhile, the search upstairs was completed, and every one had returned to Prosper's office. The commissary, who had seemed so calm when he first came, now looked grave and perplexed. The moment for taking a decisive part had come, yet it was evident that he hesitated. "You see, gentlemen," he began, "our search has only confirmed our first opinion." M. Fauvel and Prosper bowed assentingly.

"And what do you think, M. Fanferlot?" continued the commissary. Fanferlot did not answer. Occupied in studying the lock of the safe, he manifested signs of a lively surprise. Evidently he had just made an important discovery. M. Fauvel, Prosper, and the commissary rose, and surrounded him.

"Have you discovered any trace?" asked the banker eagerly.

Fanferlot turned round with a vexed air. He reproached himself for not having concealed his impressions. "Oh!" said he carelessly, "I have discovered nothing of importance."

"But we should like to know," said Prosper.

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"I have merely convinced myself that this safe has been recently opened or shut, I know not which, with some violence and haste."

"How so?" asked the commissary, becoming attentive.

"Look, sir, at this scratch near the lock."

The commissary stooped down, and carefully examined the safe; he saw a slight scratch several inches long that had removed the outer coat of varnish. "I see the scratch," said he, "but what does it prove?"

"Oh, nothing at all!" said Fanferlot "I just now told you it was of no importance."

Fanferlot said this, but it was not his real opinion. This scratch, undeniably fresh, had for him a signification that escaped the others. He said to himself: "This confirms my suspicions. If the cashier had stolen millions, there was no occasion for his being in a hurry; whereas the banker creeping down in the dead of the night with furtive footsteps, for fear of awakening the man in the outer room, in order to rifle his own safe, had every reason to tremble, to hurry, to hastily withdraw the key, which, slipping out of the lock, scratched off the varnish."

Resolved to unravel alone the tangled thread of this mystery, the detective determined to keep his conjectures to himself; for the same reason he was silent as to the interview which he had witnessed between Madeleine and Prosper. He hastened to withdraw attention from the scratch upon the lock. "To conclude," he said, addressing the commissary, "I am convinced that no one outside of the bank could have obtained access to this room. The safe, moreover, is intact. No suspicious pressure has been used on the movable buttons. I can assert that the lock has not been tampered with by burgulars' tools or false keys. Those who opened the safe knew the word, and possessed the key."

This formal affirmation of a man whom he knew to be skilful ended the hesitation of the commissary. "That being the case," he replied, "I must request a few moments' conversation with M. Fauvel."

"I am at your service," said the banker.

Prosper foresaw the result of this conversation. He quietly placed his hat on the table to show that he had no intention of attempting to escape, and passed into the adjoining office. Fanferlot also went out, but not before the commissary had

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made him a sign, and received one in return. This sign signified, "You are responsible for this man."

The detective needed no hint to make him keep a strict watch. His suspicions were too vague, his desire for success was too ardent, for him to lose sight of Prosper an instant. Closely following the cashier, he seated himself in a dark corner of the office, and, pretending to be sleepy, he fixed himself in a comfortable position for taking a nap, gaped until his jawbone seemed about to be dislocated, then closed his eyes and kept perfectly quiet.

Prosper took a seat at the desk of an absent clerk. The others were burning to know the result of the investigation; their eyes shone with curiosity, but they dared not ask a question. Unable to restrain himself any longer, little Cavaillon, Prosper's defender, ventured to say: "Well, who stole the money?"

Prosper shrugged his shoulders. "Nobody knows," he replied.

Was this conscious innocence or hardened recklessness? The clerks observed with bewildered surprise that Prosper had resumed his usual manner—that sort of icy haughtiness that kept people at a distance, and made him so unpopular in the bank. Save the deathlike pallor of his face, and the dark circles around his swollen eyes, he bore no traces of the pitiable agitation he had exhibited not long before. Never would a stranger entering the office have supposed that this young man, idly lounging in a chair and toying with a pencil, was resting under an accusation of robbery, and was about to be arrested. He soon stopped playing with the pencil, and drew toward him a sheet of paper upon which he hastily wrote a few lines.

"Ah, ha!" thought Fanferlot, the squirrel, whose hearing and sight were wonderfully good in spite of his profound sleep; "eh! eh! he makes his little confidential communication on paper, I see; now we will discover something positive."

His note written, Prosper folded it carefully into the smallest possible size, and after furtively glancing toward the detective, who remained motionless in his corner, threw it across the desk to little Cavaillon with this one word—"Gipsy!"

All this was so quickly and cleverly done that Fanferlot was confounded, and began to feel a little uneasy. "The devil take him!" said he to himself; "for a suffering innocent this young dandy has more pluck and nerve than many of my oldest customers. This, however, shows the result of education!"

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Yes, innocent or guilty, Prosper must have been endowed with great self-control and power of dissimulation to affect this presence of mind at a time when his honor, his future happiness, all that he held dear in life, were at stake. And he was not more than thirty years old.

Either from natural deference, or from the hope of gaining some ray of light by a private conversation, the commissary determined to speak to the banker before acting decisively. "There is not a shadow of doubt," said he, as soon as they were alone; "this young man has robbed you. It would be a gross neglect of duty if I did not secure his person. The law will decide whether he shall be released or sent to prison."

This declaration seemed to distress the banker. He sank into a chair, and murmured: "Poor Prosper!" Seeing the astonished look of his listener, he added: "Until to-day, I have always had the most implicit faith in my cashier's honesty, and would have unhesitatingly confided my fortune to his keeping. Almost on my knees have I besought and implored him to confess that in a moment of desperation he had taken the money, promising him pardon and forgetfulness; but I could not move him. I loved him; and even now, in spite of the trouble and humiliation that he is heaping upon me, I can not bring myself to feel harshly toward him."

The commissary looked as if he did not understand. "What do you mean by humiliation?" he asked.

"What!" said M. Fauvel excitedly, "is not justice the same for all? Because I am the head of a bank, and he only a clerk, does it follow that my word is more to be relied upon than his? Why could I not have robbed myself? Such things have been done. They will ask me for facts; and I shall be compelled to expose the exact situation of my house, explain my affairs, disclose the secret and method of my operations."

"It is possible that you will be called upon for some explanation; but your well-known integrity—"

"Alas! He was honest too. His integrity has never been doubted. Who would have been suspected this morning if I had not been able to instantly produce a hundred thousand crowns? Who would be suspected if I could not prove that my assets exceed my liabilities by more than three millions?"

To a strictly honorable man, the thought, the possibility of suspicion tarnishing his fair name, is cruel suffering. The banker suffered, and the commissary of police saw it, and felt

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for him. "Be calm, sir," said he; "before the end of a week, justice will have collected sufficient proof to establish the guilt of this unfortunate man, whom we may now recall."

Prosper entered with Fanferlot—whom they had much trouble to awaken—and with the most stolid indifference listened to the announcement of his arrest. In response he calmly said: "I swear that I am guiltless."

M. Fauvel, much more disturbed and excited than his cashier, made a last attempt. "It is not too late yet, poor boy," he said: "for heaven's sake reflect—"

Prosper did not appear to hear him. He drew from his pocket a small key, which he laid on the table, and said: "Here, sir, is the key of your safe. I hope for my sake that you will some day be convinced of my innocence; and I hope for your sake that the conviction will not come too late." Then as every one was silent, he resumed: "Before leaving I hand over to you the books, papers, and accounts necessary for my successor. I must at the same time inform you that, without speaking of the stolen three hundred and fifty thousand francs, I leave a deficit in cash."

A deficit! This ominous word from the lips of the cashier fell like a bombshell upon the ears of Prosper's hearers. His declaration was interpreted in divers ways. "A deficit!" thought the commissary; "how, after this, can his guilt be doubted? Before stealing the whole contents of the safe, he has kept his hand in by occasional small thefts." "A deficit!" said the detective to himself, "now, no doubt, the very innocence of this poor wretch gives his conduct an appearance of great depravity; were he guilty, he would have replaced the first money by a portion of the second."

The grave importance of Prosper's statement was considerably lessened by the explanation he proceeded to make: "There is a deficit of three thousand five hundred francs on my cash account, which has been disposed of in the following manner: two thousand taken by myself in advance on my salary; fifteen hundred advanced to several of my fellow clerks. This is the last day of the month: to-morrow the salaries will be paid, consequently—"

The commissary interrupted him: "Were you authorized to draw money whenever you wished for yourself or the clerks?"

"No; but I knew that M. Fauvel would not have refused me permission to oblige my friends in the bank. What I did

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is done everywhere; I have simply followed my predecessor's example." The banker made a sign of assent. "As regards that spent by myself," continued the cashier, "I had a sort of right to it, all of my savings being deposited in this bank; about fifteen thousand francs."

"That is true," said M. Fauvel, "M. Bertomy has at least that amount on deposit."

This last question settled, the commissary's errand was at an end, and his report might now be made. He announced his intention of leaving, and ordered the cashier to prepare to follow him.

Usually, the moment—when stern reality stares us in the face, when our individuality is lost, and we feel that we are being deprived of our liberty—is terrible. At the fatal command, "Follow me," which brings before our eyes the yawning prison gates, the most hardened sinner feels his courage fail, and abjectly begs for mercy. But Prosper lost none of that studied stoicism which the commissary of police secretly pronounced consummate impudence. Slowly, with as much careless ease as if going to lunch with a friend, he smoothed his hair, drew on his overcoat and gloves, and said politely: "I am ready, sir, to accompany you."

The commissary folded up his note-book, and bowing to M. Fauvel, said to Prosper: "Come with me!"

They left the room, and with a distressed face, and eyes filled with tears that he could not restrain, the banker stood watching their retreating forms.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed: "gladly would I give twice that sum to regain my old confidence in poor Prosper, and be able to keep him with me!"

The quick-eared Fanferlot overheard these words, and prompt to suspicion, and ever disposed to impute to others the deep astuteness peculiar to himself, was convinced they had been uttered for his benefit. He had remained behind the others, under pretext of looking for an imaginary umbrella, and, as he reluctantly departed, said he would call in again to see if it had been found.

It was Fanferlot's task to escort Prosper to prison; but, as they were about starting, he asked the commissary to leave him at liberty to pursue another course, a request which his superior granted. Fanferlot had resolved to obtain possession of Prosper's note, which he knew to be in Cavaillon's pocket.

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To obtain this written proof, which must be an important one, appeared the easiest thing in the world. He had simply to arrest Çavaillon, frighten him, demand the letter, and, if necessary, take it by force. But to what would this lead? To nothing but an incomplete and doubtful result.

Fanferlot was convinced that the note was intended, not for the young clerk, but for a third person. If exasperated, Cavaillon might refuse to divulge who this person was, who after all might not bear the name "Gipsy" pronounced by the cashier. And, even if he did answer his questions, would he not lie? After mature reflection, Fanferlot decided that it would be superfluous to ask for a secret when it could be surprised. To quietly follow Cavaillon, and keep close watch on him until he caught him in the very act of handing over the letter, was but play for the detective. This method of proceeding, moreover, was much more in keeping with the character of Fanferlot, who, being naturally soft and stealthy, deemed it due to his profession to avoid all disturbance or anything resembling violence.

Fanferlot's plan was settled when he reached the vestibule. He began talking with an office-boy, and, after a few apparently idle questions, discovered that Fauvel's bank had no outlet on the Rue de la Victoire, and that consequently all the clerks were obliged to pass in and out through the main entrance in the Rue de Provence. From this moment the task he had undertaken no longer presented a shadow of difficulty. He rapidly crossed the street, and took up his position under a gateway. His post of observation was admirably chosen; not only could he see every one who entered and came out of the bank, but he also commanded a view of all the windows, and by standing on tiptoe could look through the grating and see Cavaillon bending over his desk.

Fanferlot waited a long time, but did not get impatient, for he had often remained on watch entire days and nights at a time, with much less important objects in view than the present one. Besides, his mind was busily occupied in estimating the value of his discoveries, weighing his chances, and, like Perrette with her pot of milk, building the foundation of his fortune upon present success. Finally, about one o'clock, he saw Cavaillon rise from his desk, change his coat, and take down his hat. "Very good!" he exclaimed, "my man is coming out; I must keep my eyes open."

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The next moment Cavaillon appeared at the door of the bank; but before stepping on the pavement he looked up and down the street in an undecided manner.

"Can he suspect anything?" thought Fanferlot.

No, the young clerk suspected nothing; only having a commission to execute, and fearing his absence would be observed, he was debating with himself which would be the shortest road for him to take. He soon decided, entered the Faubourg Montmartre, and walked up the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette so rapidly, utterly regardless of the grumbling passers-by whom he elbowed out of his way, that Fanferlot found it difficult to keep him in sight. Reaching the Rue Chaptal, Cavaillon suddenly stopped, and entered the house numbered 39. He had scarcely taken three steps in the narrow hall when he felt a touch on his shoulder, and turning abruptly found himself face to face with Fanferlot. He recognized him at once, and turning very pale he shrank back, and looked around for means of escape. But the detective, anticipating the attempt, barred the way. Cavaillon saw that he was fairly caught. "What do you want with me?" he asked in a voice tremulous with fright.

Fanferlot was distinguished among his colleagues for his exquisite suavity and unequaled urbanity. Even with his prisoners he was the perfection of courtesy, and never was known to handcuff a man without first apologizing for being compelled to do so. "You will be kind enough, my dear sir," he said, "to excuse the great liberty I take; but I really am under the necessity of asking you for a little information."

"Information! From me?"

"From you, my dear sir; from M. Eugene Cavaillon."

"But I do not know you."

"Oh, yes, you must remember seeing me this morning. It is only about a trifling matter, and you will overwhelm me with obligations if you will do me the honor to accept my arm, and step outside for a moment." What could Cavaillon do? He took Fanferlot's arm, and went out with him.

The Rue Chaptal is not one of those noisy thoroughfares where foot-passengers are in perpetual danger of being run over by numberless vehicles dashing to and fro; there are but two or three shops, and from the corner of the Rue Fontaine, occupied by an apothecary, to the entrance of the Rue Leonie, extends a high, gloomy wall, broken here and there by some small windows which light the carpenters' shops behind. It is

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one of those streets where you can talk at your ease, without having to step from the sidewalk every moment. So Fanferlot and Cavaillon were in no danger of being disturbed by passers-by.

"What I wished to say, my dear sir," began the detective, "is that M. Prosper Bertomy threw you a note this morning."

Cavaillon vaguely foresaw that he was to be questioned about this note and instantly put himself on his guard. "You are mistaken," he said, blushing to his ears.

"Excuse me for presuming to contradict you, but I am quite certain of what I say."

"I assure you that Prosper never gave me anything."

"Pray, sir, do not persist in a denial; you will compel me to prove that four clerks saw him throw you a note written in pencil and closely folded."

Cavaillon saw the folly of further contradicting a man so well informed; so he changed his tactics, and said: "It is true Prosper gave me a note this morning; but as it was intended for me alone, after reading it, I tore it up, and threw the pieces in the fire."

This might be the truth. Fanferlot feared so; but how could he assure himself of the fact? He remembered that the most palpable tricks often succeed the best, and, trusting to his star, he said at hazard: "Permit me to observe that this statement is not correct; the note was entrusted to you to give to Gipsy."

A despairing gesture from Cavaillon apprised the detective that he was not mistaken; he breathed again. "I swear to you, sir—" began the young man.

"Do not swear," interrupted Fanferlot: "all the oaths in the world would be useless. You not only preserved the note, but you came to this house for the purpose of giving it to Gipsy, and it is in your pocket now."

"No, sir, no!"

Fanferlot paid no attention to this denial, but continued in his gentlest tone: "And I am sure you will be kind enough to give it to me; believe me, nothing but the most absolute necessity—"

"Never!" exclaimed Cavaillon; and, believing the moment favorable, he suddenly attempted to jerk his arm from under Fanferlot's and escape. But his efforts were vain; the detective's strength was equal to his suavity.

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"Don't hurt yourself, young man," he said, "but take my advice, and quietly give up the letter."

"I have not got it."

"Very well; see, you reduce me to painful extremities. If you persist in being so obstinate, I shall call two policemen, who will take you by each arm, and escort you to the commissary of police; and, once there, I shall be under the painful necessity of searching your pockets, whether you will or not."

Cavaillon was devoted to Prosper, and willing to make any sacrifice in his behalf; but he clearly saw that it was worse than useless to struggle any longer, as he would have no time to destroy the note. To deliver it under force was no betrayal; but he cursed his powerlessness, and almost wept with rage. "I am in your power," he said, and then suddenly drew from his pocket-book the unlucky note, and gave it to the detective.

Fanferlot trembled with pleasure as he unfolded the paper; yet, faithful to his habits of fastidious politeness, before reading it, he bowed to Cavaillon and said: "You will permit me, will you not, sir?" Then he read as follows:

"DEAR NINA—If you love me, follow my instructions instantly, without a moment's hesitation, without asking any questions. On the receipt of this note, take everything you have in the house, *absolutely everything*, and establish yourself in furnished rooms at the other end of Paris. Do not appear in public, but conceal yourself as much as possible. My life may depend on your obedience. I am accused of an outrageous robbery, and am about to be arrested. Take with you five hundred francs, which you will find in the secretary. Leave your address with Cavaillon, who will explain what I have not time to tell. Be hopeful, whatever happens. Good-by!

"PROSPER."

Had Cavaillon been less bewildered, he would have seen blank disappointment depicted upon the detective's face after the perusal of the note. Fanferlot had cherished the hope that he was about to possess a very important document which would clearly prove the guilt or innocence of Prosper; whereas he had only seized a love-letter written by a man who was evidently more anxious about the welfare of the woman he loved than about his own. Vainly did he puzzle over the letter, hoping to discover some hidden meaning: twist the words as he would,

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they proved nothing for or against the writer. The two words "absolutely everything" were underscored, it is true; but they could be interpreted in so many ways. The detective, however, determined not to drop the matter here. "This Madame Nina Gipsy is doubtless a friend of M. Prosper Bertomy?"

"She is his *particular* friend."

"Ah, I understand; and she lives here at No. 39?"

"You know it well enough, as you saw me go in there."

"I suspected it to be the house, but now tell me whether the apartments she occupies are rented in her name."

"No. Prosper rents them."

"Exactly; and on which floor, if you please?"

"On the first."

During this colloquy, Fanferlot had folded up the note, and slipped it into his pocket. "A thousand thanks," said he, "for the information; and, in return, I will relieve you of the trouble of executing your commission."

"Sir!"

"Yes; with your permission, I will myself take this note to Madame Nina Gipsy."

Cavaillon began to remonstrate, but Fanferlot cut him short by saying: "I will also venture to give you a piece of advice Return quietly to your business and have nothing more to do with this affair."

"But Prosper is a good friend of mine, and has saved me from ruin more than once."

"Only the more reason for your keeping quiet. You can not be of the slightest assistance to him, and I can tell you that you may be of great injury. As you are known to be his devoted friend, of course your absence at this time will be remarked upon. Any steps that you take in this matter will receive the worst interpretation."

"Prosper is innocent, I am sure."

Fanferlot was of the same opinion, but he had no idea of betraying his private thoughts; and yet for the success of his investigations it was necessary to impress the importance of prudence and discretion upon the young man. He would have told him to keep silent concerning what had passed between them, but he dared not.

"What you say may be true," he said. "I hope it is for the sake of M. Bertomy, and on your own account too; for, if he is guilty, you will certainly be very much annoyed, and perhaps

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suspected of complicity, as you are well known to be intimate with him."

Cavaillon was overcome.

"Now, you had better take my advice, and return to the bank, and—good morning, sir."

The poor fellow obeyed. Slowly and with swelling heart he returned to the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette. He asked himself how he could serve Prosper, warn Madame Gipsy, and above all, have his revenge upon this odious detective, who had just made him suffer such humiliation. He had no sooner turned the corner of the street than Fanferlot entered No. 39, mentioned the name of Prosper Bertomy to the concierge, went upstairs, and knocked at the first door he came to. It was opened by a youthful footman, dressed in the most fanciful livery.

"Is Madame Gipsy at home?" inquired Fanferlot.

The servant hesitated; seeing this, Fanferlot showed his note and said: "M. Prosper told me to hand this note to madame and wait for an answer."

"Walk in, and I will let madame know you are here."

The name of Prosper produced its effect. Fanferlot was ushered into a little room furnished in blue and gold silk damask. Heavy curtains darkened the windows, and hung in front of the doors. The floor was covered with a blue velvet-pile carpet.

"Our cashier was certainly well lodged," murmured the detective. But he had no time to pursue his inventory. One of the curtains was pushed aside, and Madame Nina Gipsy stood before him. She was quite young, small, and graceful, with a brown or rather gold-colored quadroon complexion, and the hands and feet of a child. Long curling silk lashes softened the piercing brilliancy of her large black eyes; her lips were full, and her teeth were very white. She had not yet made her toilet, but wore a velvet dressing-gown, which did not conceal the lace ruffles beneath. But she had already been under the hands of a hairdresser. Her hair was curled and frizzed high on her forehead, and confined by narrow bands of red velvet; her back hair was rolled in an immense coil, and held by a beautiful gold comb. She was ravishing. Her beauty was so startling that the dazzled detective was speechless with admiration.

"Well," he said to himself, as he remembered the noble,

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severe beauty of Madeleine, whom he had seen a few hours previous, "our young gentleman certainly has good taste—very good taste—two perfect beauties!"

While he thus reflected, perfectly bewildered, and wondering how he could begin the conversation, Madame Gipsy eyed him with the most disdainful surprise: she was waiting for this shabby little man in a threadbare coat and greasy hat to explain his presence in her dainty drawing-room. She had many creditors, and was recalling them, and wondering which one had dared send this man to wipe his dusty boots on her velvet-pile carpets. After scrutinizing him from head to foot with undisguised contempt, she said haughtily: "What is it that you want?"

Any one but Fanferlot would have been offended at her insolent manner; but he only noticed it to gain some notion of the young woman's disposition. "She is bad-tempered," he thought, "and is uneducated."

While he was speculating upon her merits, Madame Nina impatiently stamped her little foot, and waited for an answer; finally she said: "Why don't you speak? What do you want here?"

"I am charged, my dear madame," he answered in his blandest tone, "by M. Bertomy to give you this note."

"From Prosper! You know him then?"

"I have that honor, madame; indeed, I may be so bold as to claim him as a friend."

"What, sir! *You* a friend of Prosper!" exclaimed Madame Gipsy in a scornful tone, as if her pride were wounded.

Fanferlot did not condescend to notice this offensive exclamation. He was ambitious, and contempt failed to irritate him. "I said a friend of his, madame, and there are few people who would have the courage to claim friendship for him now."

Madame Gipsy was struck by the words and manner of Fanferlot. "I never could guess riddles," she said tartly; "will you be kind enough to explain what you mean?"

The detective slowly drew Prosper's note from his pocket, and, with a bow, presented it to Madame Gipsy. "Read, madame," he said.

She certainly anticipated no misfortune; although her sight was excellent, she stopped to fasten a tiny gold eyeglass on her nose, then carelessly opened the note. At a glance she read its contents. She turned very pale, then very red; she trembled

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as if with a nervous chill; her limbs seemed to give way, and she tottered so that Fanferlot, thinking she was about to fall, extended his arms to catch her.

Useless precaution! Madame Gipsy was one of those women whose inert listlessness conceals indomitable energy; fragile-looking creatures whose powers of endurance and resistance are unlimited; cat-like in their soft grace and delicacy, especially cat-like in their nerves and muscles of steel. The dizziness caused by the shock she had received quickly passed off. She tottered, but did not fall, and stood up looking stronger than ever; seizing the wrist of the detective, she held it as if her delicate little hands were a vise, and cried out: "Explain yourself! what does all this mean? Do you know anything about the contents of this note?"

Although Fanferlot showed plenty of courage in daily contending with the most dangerous rascals; he was almost terrified by the action of Madame Gipsy. "Alas!" was all he murmured.

"Prosper is to be arrested, accused of being a thief?"

"Yes, madame, he is accused of taking three hundred and fifty thousand francs from the bank safe."

"It is false, infamous, absurd!" she cried. She had dropped Fanferlot's hand; and her fury, like that of a spoiled child, found vent in violent actions. She tore her web-like handkerchief, and the magnificent lace on her gown, to shreds. "Prosper steal!" she cried; "what a stupid idea! Why should he steal? Is he not rich?"

"M. Bertomy is not rich, madame; he has nothing but his salary."

This answer seemed to confound Madame Gipsy. "But," she insisted, "I have always seen him with plenty of money; not rich—then—" She dared not finish; but her eye met Fanferlot's, and they understood each other.

Madame Nina's look meant: "He committed this robbery in order to gratify my extravagant whims." Fanferlot's glance signified: "Very likely, madame."

A few moments' reflection restored Nina's original assurance. Doubt fled after hovering for an instant over her agitated mind. "No!" she cried. "I regret to say that Prosper would never have stolen a single sou for me. One can understand a man robbing a bank to obtain the means of bestowing pleasure and luxury upon the woman he loves; but Prosper does not love me; he never has loved me."

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"Oh, my dear lady!" protested the gallant and insinuating Fanferlot, "you surely can not mean what you say."

Her beautiful eyes filled with tears as she sadly shook her head and replied: "I mean exactly what I say. It is only too true. He is ready to gratify my every wish, you may say; what does that prove? Nothing. I am too well convinced that he does not love me. I know what love is. Once I was beloved by an affectionate, true-hearted man; and my own sufferings of the last year make me know how miserable I must have made him by my cold return. Alas! we must suffer ourselves before we can feel for others. No, I am nothing to Prosper; he would not care if—"

"But then, madame, why—"

"Ah, yes," interrupted Nina, "why? You will be very wise if you can answer me. For a year have I vainly sought an answer to this question, so sad to me. I, a woman, can not answer it; and I defy you to do so. You can not discover the thoughts of a man who is so thoroughly master of himself that he never permits a single idea that is passing through his mind to be detected upon his countenance. I have watched him as only a woman can watch the man upon whom her fate depends, but it has always been in vain. He is kind and indulgent; but he does not betray himself, never will commit himself. Ignorant people call him weak, yielding: I tell you that fair-haired man is a rod of iron painted like a reed!"

Carried away by the violence of her feelings, Madame Nina betrayed her inmost thoughts. She was without distrust, never suspecting that the stranger listening to her was other than a friend of Prosper. As for Fanferlot, he congratulated himself upon his success. No one but a woman could have drawn him so excellent a portrait; in a moment of excitement she had given him the most valuable information; he now knew the nature of the man with whom he had to deal, which, in an investigation like that he was pursuing, is the principal point.

"You know that M. Bertomy gambles," he ventured to say, "and gambling is apt to lead a man—"

Madame Gipsy shrugged her shoulders, and interrupted him. "Yes, he plays," she said, "but he is not a gambler. I have seen him lose and gain large sums without betraying the slightest agitation. He plays as he drinks, as he sups, as he dissipates—without passion, without enthusiasm, without pleasure. Sometimes he frightens me; he seems to drag about a body with-

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out a soul. Ah, I am not happy! Never have I been able to overcome his indifference, an indifference so great, so reckless, that I often think it must be despair; nothing will convince me that he has not some terrible secret, some great misfortune weighing upon his mind, and making life a burden."

"Then he has never spoken to you of his past?"

"Why should he tell me? Did you not hear me? I tell you he does not love me!"

Madame Nina was overcome by thoughts of the past, and tears silently coursed down her cheeks. But her despair was only momentary. She started up, and, her eyes sparkling with generous resolution, she exclaimed: "But I love him, and I will save him! I will see his chief, the miserable wretch who dares to accuse him. I will haunt the judges, and I will prove that he is innocent. Come, sir, let us start, and I promise you that before sunset he shall be free, or I shall be in prison with him."

Madame Gipsy's project was certainly laudable, and prompted by the noblest sentiments; but unfortunately it was impracticable. Moreover, it would be going counter to the plans of the detective. Although he had resolved to reserve to himself all the difficulties as well as the benefits of this inquiry, Fanferlot saw clearly that he could not conceal the existence of Madame Nina from the investigating magistrate. She would necessarily be brought into the case, and be sought after. But he did not wish her to take any steps of her own accord. He proposed to let her appear when and how he judged proper, so that he might gain for himself the merit of having discovered her.

Fanferlot's first step was to try to calm the young woman's excitement. He thought it easy to prove to her that the slightest interference in favor of Prosper would be a piece of folly. "What will you gain by acting thus, my dear madame?" he asked. "Nothing. I can assure you that you have not the least chance of success. Remember that you will seriously compromise yourself. Who knows if you will not be suspected as M. Bertomy's accomplice?"

But this alarming perspective, which had frightened Cavaillon into foolishly giving up a letter which he might so easily have retained, only stimulated Gipsy's enthusiasm. Man calculates, while woman follows the inspirations of her heart. Our most devoted friend, if a man, hesitates and draws back; if a woman,

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rushes undauntedly forward, regardless of the danger. "What matters the risk?" she exclaimed. "I don't believe any danger exists; but, if it does, so much the better: it will be all the more to my credit. I am sure Prosper is innocent; but, if he should be guilty, I wish to share the punishment which awaits him."

Madame Gipsy's persistence was becoming alarming. She astily drew around her a cashmere shawl, put on her bonnet, and, although still wearing her dressing-gown and slippers, declared that she was ready to walk from one end of Paris to the other, in search of this or the other magistrate.

"Come, sir," she said, with feverish impatience. "Are you not coming with me?"

Fanferlot was perplexed. Happily he had always several strings to his bow. Personal considerations having no hold upon this impulsive nature, he resolved to appeal to her interest in Prosper.

"I am at your command, my dear lady," he said; "let us go if you desire it; only permit me, while there is yet time, to say that we are very probably about to do great injury to M. Bertomy."

"In what way, if you please?"

"Because we are taking a step that he expressly forbade in his letter; we are surprising him—giving him no warning."

Nina scornfully tossed her head, and replied: "There are some people who must be saved without warning, and against their will. I know Prosper; he is just the man to let himself be murdered without a struggle, without speaking a word—to give himself up through sheer recklessness and despair."

"Excuse me, madame," interrupted the detective; "M. Bertomy has by no means the appearance of a man who has abandoned himself to despair. On the contrary, I think he has already prepared his plan of defense. By showing yourself, when he advises you to remain in concealment, you will very likely render his most careful precautions useless."

Madame Gipsy was silently weighing the value of Fanferlot's objections. Finally she said: "I can not remain here inactive without attempting to contribute in some way to his safety. Can you not understand that this floor burns my feet?"

Evidently, if she was not absolutely convinced, her resolution was shaken. Fanferlot saw that he was gaining ground, and this certainty, putting him more at east, gave weight to his

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persuasive eloquence. "You have it in your power, madame," he said, "to render a great service to the man you love."

"In what way, sir? tell me in what way."

"Obey him, my child," said Fanferlot in a paternal tone.

Madame Gipsy evidently expected very different advice. "Obey," she murmured, "obey!"

"It is your duty," said Fanferlot with grave dignity; "it is your sacred duty."

She still hesitated; and he took from the table Prosper's note, which she had láid there, and continued: "What! M. Bertomy at the most trying moment, when he is about to be arrested, stops to point out your line of conduct; and you would render vain this wise precaution! What does he say to you? Let us read over this note, which is like the testament of his liberty. He says, 'If you love me, I entreat you, obey.' And you hesitate to obey. Then you do not love him. Can you not understand, unhappy child, that M. Bertomy has his reasons, terrible, imperious reasons, for your remaining in obscurity for the present?"

Fanferlot understood these reasons the moment he put his foot in the sumptuous apartment of the Rue Chaptal; and, if he did not expose them now, it was because he kept them as a good general keeps his reserve, for the purpose of deciding the victory. Madame Gipsy was intelligent enough to divine these reasons.

"Reasons for my hiding!" thought she. "Prosper wishes, then, to keep every one in ignorance of our intimacy."

She remained thoughtful for a moment; then a ray of light seemed to cross her mind, and she exclaimed: "Oh, I understand now! Fool that I was for not seeing it before! My presence here, where I have been for a year, would be an overwhelming charge against him. An inventory of my possessions would be taken—of my dresses, my laces, my jewels—and my luxury would be brought against him as a crime. He would be asked where he obtained the money requisite to lavish all these elegancies on me."

The detective bowed, and said: "That is perfectly true, madame."

"Then I must fly at once! Who knows that the police are not already warned, and may appear at any moment?"

"Oh," said Fanferlot with easy assurance, "you have plenty of time; the police are not so very prompt."

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"No matter!"

And, leaving the detective alone in the parlor, Madame Nina hastily ran into her bedroom, and calling her maid, her cook, and her little footman, ordered them to empty her drawers and wardrobe of their contents, and assisted them to stuff her best clothing and jewels into her trunks. Suddenly she rushed back to Fanferlot, and said: "Everything will be ready for me to start in a few minutes; but where am I to go?"

"Did not M. Bertomy say, my dear lady, to the other end of Paris? To a hotel, or furnished apartments."

"But I don't know where to find any."

Fanferlot seemed to be reflecting; but he had great difficulty in concealing his delight at a sudden idea that flashed upon him; his little black eyes fairly danced with joy. "I know a hotel," he said at last, "but it might not suit you. It is not elegantly furnished like this apartment."

"Should I be comfortable there?"

"Upon my recommendation you would be treated like a queen, and, above all, you would be kept concealed."

"Where is it?"

"On the other side of the river, on the Quai Saint Michel. It is called the Grand Archangel, and is kept by Madame Alexandre."

Madame Nina was never long making up her mind. "Here are pen and paper," said she, "write your recommendation."

Fanferlot rapidly wrote, and handed her the letter, saying: "With these three lines, madame, you can make Madame Alexandre do anything you wish."

"Very good. Now, how am I to let Cavaillon know my address? It was he who should have brought me Prosper's letter."

"He was unable to come, madame," interrupted the detective; "but I will give him your address."

Madame Gipsy was about to send for a carriage, but Fanferlot said he was in a hurry and would procure her one. He seemed to be in luck that day; for a cab was passing the door, and he hailed it. "Wait here," he said to the driver, after telling him that he was a detective, "for a little brunette who is coming down with some trunks. If she tells you to drive her to the Quai Saint Michel, crack your whip; if she gives you any other address, get down from your box and arrange your harness. I will keep in sight."

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He stepped across the street, and stood in the door of a wine-shop. He had not long to wait. In a few minutes the loud cracking of a whip apprised him that Madame Nina had started for the Hotel of the Grand Archangel. "Aha!" said he gaily, "I hold *her* at any rate."

IV

AT the same hour that Madame Nina Gipsy was seeking refuge at the Grand Archangel, so highly recommended by Fanferlot, Prosper Bertomy was being consigned to the depot of the Prefecture of Police. From the moment he had resumed his habitual composure, he never once faltered. Vainly did the people around him watch for a suspicious expression, or any sign of his giving way under the embarrassment of his situation. His face was stolid as marble, and one would have supposed him insensible to the horrors of his condition had not his heavy breathing, and the beads of perspiration standing on his brow, betrayed the intense agony he was suffering.

At the police station, where Prosper had to wait for two hours while the commissary went to receive orders from higher authorities, he entered into conversation with the two police agents who had charge of him. At twelve o'clock he said he was hungry, and sent to a restaurant near by for his lunch, which he ate with a good appetite, and also drank nearly a bottle of wine. While he was thus occupied, several clerks from the Prefecture, who have to transact business daily with the commissaries of police, eyed him curiously. They all formed the same opinion, and admiringly said to each other: "Well, he is certainly made of strong stuff, that fellow!" And again: "The young gentleman doesn't seem to care much. He has evidently something in reserve."

When he was told that a cab was waiting for him at the door, he at once rose; but, before going out, requested permission to light a cigar, which was granted him. A flower-girl stood just by the door, and he stopped and bought a bunch of

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violets of her. The girl, seeing that he was arrested, said, by way of thanks: "Good luck to you, my poor gentleman!"

Prosper appeared touched by this mark of interest, and replied: "Thanks, my good girl, but 'tis a long time since luck has been in my way."

It was magnificent weather, a bright spring morning. As the cab went along the Rue Montmartre, Prosper kept his head out of the window, smilingly complaining at the same time at being imprisoned on such a lovely day, when everything outside was so sunny and pleasant. "It is singular," he said, "I never felt so great a desire to take a walk."

One of the police agents, a large, jovial, red-faced man, received this remark with a hearty burst of laughter, and said; "I understand."

While Prosper was going through the formalities of the commitment, he replied with haughty brevity to the indispensable questions that were put to him. But after, being ordered to empty his pockets on the table, they began to search him, his eyes flashed with indignation, and a single tear coursed down his flushed cheek. In an instant he had recovered his stony calmness, and stood up motionless, with his arms raised in the air, so that the rough creatures about him could more conveniently ransack him from head to foot, to assure themselves that he had no suspicious object concealed under his clothes.

The search would have, perhaps, been carried to the most ignominious lengths but for the intervention of a middle-aged man of rather distinguished appearance, who wore a white cravat and gold spectacles, and was sitting at his ease by the fire. He started with surprise, and seemed much agitated, when he saw Prosper brought in by the officers; he stepped forward, as if about to speak to him, then suddenly changed his mind, and sat down again.

In spite of his own troubles, Prosper could not help perceiving that this man kept his eyes fixed upon him. Did he know him? Vainly did he try to recollect having met him before. This individual, treated with all the deference due to a chief, was no less a personage than M. Lecoq, a celebrated member of the detective police. When the men who were searching Prosper were about to take off his boots, under the idea that a knife might be concealed in them, M. Lecoq waved them aside with an air of authority, and said: "You have done enough."

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He was obeyed. All the formalities being ended, the unfortunate cashier was taken to a narrow cell; the heavily barred door was swung to and locked upon him; he breathed freely; at last he was alone. Yes, he believed himself to be alone. He was ignorant that a prison is made of glass, that the prisoner is like a miserable insect under the microscope of an entomologist.

He knew not that the walls have listening ears and watchful eyes. He felt so certain of being alone that he at once gave vent to his suppressed feelings, and, dropping his mask of impassibility, burst into a flood of tears. His long-restrained anger now flashed out like a smoldering fire. In a paroxysm of rage he uttered imprecations and curses. He dashed himself against the prison walls like a wild beast in a cage.

Prosper Bertomy was not the man he appeared to be. This haughty, correct gentleman had ardent passions and a fiery temperament. One day, when he was about twenty-four years of age, he had become suddenly fired by ambition. While all of his desires were repressed—imprisoned in his low estate, like an athlete in a strait-waistcoat—seeing around him all those rich people with whom money served the purpose of the wand in the fairy tale, he envied them their lot.

He studied the beginnings of these financial princes, and found that at the starting-point they possessed far less than himself. How, then, had they succeeded? By the force of energy, industry, and assurance. He determined to imitate and excel them.

From that day, with a force of will much less rare than we think, he imposed silence upon his instincts. He reformed not his character, but the outside of his character; and his efforts were not without success. Those who knew him had faith in his character; and his capabilities and ambition inspired the prophecy that he would be successful in attaining eminence and wealth.

And the end of all was this—to be imprisoned for robbery; that is, ruined!

For he did not attempt to deceive himself. He knew that, guilty or innocent, a man once suspected is as ineffaceably branded as the shoulder of a galley-slave. Therefore, what was the use of struggling? What benefit was a triumph which could not wash out the stain?

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When the prison attendant brought him his supper, he found him lying on his mattress, with his face buried in the pillow, weeping bitterly. Ah, he was not hungry now! Now that he was alone, he was fed upon his own bitter thoughts. He sank from a state of frenzy into one of stupefying despair, and vainly did he endeavor to clear his confused mind, and account for the dark cloud gathering about him; no loophole for escape could he discover.

The night was long and terrible, and for the first time he had nothing to count the hours by, as they slowly dragged on, but the measured tread of the patrol who came to relieve the sentinels. He was now thoroughly wretched.

At dawn he dropped into a sleep, a heavy, oppressive sleep, which was more wearisome than refreshing; from which he was startled by the rough voice of the jailer.

"Come, sir!" said he, "it is time for you to appear before the investigating magistrate."

Prosper jumped up at once, and, without stopping to set right his disordered toilet, said: "I am ready, lead the way."

The jailer remarked as they walked along: "You are very fortunate in having your case brought before a very worthy man." He was right.

Endowed with remarkable penetration, firm, unbiased, equally free from false pity and excessive severity, M. Patrigent possessed in an eminent degree all the qualities necessary for the delicate and arduous office of investigating magistrate. Perhaps he was wanting in the feverish activity which is sometimes necessary for coming to a quick and just decision; but he possessed unwearying patience, which nothing could discourage. He would cheerfully devote years to the examination of a case; he was even now engaged in an affair of Belgian bank-notes, of which he did not collect all the threads, and solve the mystery, until after four years' investigation. Thus it was always to him that they brought the endless proceedings, the half-finished inquiries, and the incomplete processes.

This was the man before whom Prosper was being conducted, and he was certainly taken by a difficult road. He was escorted along a corridor, through a room full of police agents, down a narrow flight of steps, across a kind of vault, and then up a steep staircase which seemed to have no end. Finally he reached a long, narrow gallery, on which opened numerous doors, bearing different numbers. The custodian of the unhappy cashier

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stopped before one of these doors, and said: "Here we are, and here your fate will be decided."

At this remark, uttered in a tone of deep commiseration, Prosper could not refrain from shuddering. It was only too true, that on the other side of the door was a man who would interrogate him, and according to his answers would either release him from custody or commit him for trial. Summoning all his courage, he turned the door-knob, and was about to enter when the jailer stopped him. "Don't be in such haste," he said; "you must sit down here and wait till your turn comes; then you will be called." The wretched man obeyed, and his keeper took a seat beside him.

Nothing is more doleful and terrible than having to wait in this gloomy gallery of the investigating magistrates. Occupying the entire length of the wall is a wooden bench blackened by constant use. This bench has for the last ten years been daily occupied by the murderers, thieves, and suspicious characters of the department of the Seine. Sooner or later, as filth rushes to a sewer, does crime reach this dreadful gallery with one door opening on the galleys, the other on the scaffold. This place was bitterly though vulgarly denominated by a certain magistrate as the great public wash-house of all the foul linen in Paris.

When Prosper reached the gallery it was full of people. The bench was almost entirely occupied. Close beside him, so as to touch his shoulder, sat a man with a sinister countenance, dressed in rags.

Before each door, giving access to the offices of the investigating magistrates, stood groups of witnesses conversing in an undertone. Gendarmes were constantly arriving and departing with prisoners. Sometimes, above the noise of their heavy tramping along the flagstones, a woman's stifled sob might be heard, when, looking around, you would see some poor mother or wife with her face buried in her handkerchief, weeping bitterly. At short intervals a door would open and shut, when an officer would call out a name or number.

The stifling atmosphere, and the sight of so much misery, made Prosper feel ill and faint; he felt as if another five minutes' stay among these wretched creatures would make him deathly sick, when a little old man dressed in black, wearing a steel chain, the insignia of his office, cried out: "Prosper Bertomy!"

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The unhappy man rose, and, without knowing how, found himself in the room of the investigating magistrate. For a moment he was blinded. He had come out of a dark passage; and the room in which he now found himself had a window directly opposite the door, so that a flood of light streamed suddenly upon him. This room, like all the others in the gallery, was of very ordinary appearance, and small and dingy. The wall was covered with a cheap dark paper, and on the floor was a hideous brown carpet, very much worn. Opposite the door was a large writing-table strewn with bundles of papers, furnishing the antecedents of those persons who were subjected to examinations, and behind was seated the magistrate, immediately facing those who entered, so that his countenance remained in the shade, while that of the prisoner or witness whom he questioned was in a glare of light.

Before a little table, on the right, sat a clerk, the indispensable auxiliary of the magistrate, engaged in writing.

But Prosper observed none of these details: his whole attention was concentrated upon the arbiter of his fate, and as he closely examined his face he was convinced that the jailer was right in styling him an honorable man. M. Patrigent's homely face, with its irregular outline and short red whiskers, lit up by a pair of bright, intelligent eyes, and a kindly expression, was calculated to impress one favorably at first sight. "Take a chair," he said to Prosper.

This little attention was gratefully welcomed by the prisoner, for he had expected to be treated with harsh contempt. He looked upon it as a good sign, and his mind felt a slight relief. M. Patrigent turned toward the clerk, and said: "We will begin now, Sigault; pay attention."

Looking at Prosper, he then asked him his name.

"Auguste Prosper Bertomy," replied the cashier.

"How old are you?"

"I shall be thirty on the fifth of next May."

"What is your profession?"

"I am—that is, I was—chief cashier in M. Andre Fauvel's bank."

The magistrate stopped to consult a little memorandum book lying on his desk. Prosper, who followed closely his every movement, began to be hopeful, saying to himself that never would a man seemingly so unprejudiced be cruel enough to send him to prison again. After finding what he looked for, M.

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Patrigent resumed the examination. "Where do you live?" he asked.

"At No. 39, Rue Chaptal, for the last four years. Before that time I lived at No. 7, Boulevard des Batignolles."

"Where were you born?"

"At Beaucaire, in the department of Le Gard."

"Are your parents living?"

"My mother died two years ago; my father is still living."

"Does he reside in Paris?"

"No, sir; he lives at Beaucaire with my sister, who married one of the engineers of the Southern Canal." It was in broken accents that Prosper answered these last questions. Though there are moments in the life of a man when home memories encourage and console him, there are also moments when he would be thankful to be without a single tie, when he bitterly regrets that he is not alone in the world.

M. Patrigent observed the prisoner's emotion when he spoke of his parents. "What is your father's calling?" he continued.

"He was formerly a superintendent of roads and bridges; then he was employed on the Southern Canal like my brother-in-law; now he has retired on a pension."

There was a moment's silence. The magistrate had turned his chair round, so that, although his head was apparently averted, he had a good view of the workings of Prosper's countenance. "Well," he said abruptly, "you are accused of having robbed M. Fauvel of three hundred and fifty thousand francs."

During the last twenty-four hours the wretched young man had had time to familiarize himself with the terrible idea of this accusation; and yet, uttered as it was now in this formal, brief tone, it seemed to strike him with a horror which rendered him incapable of opening his lips. "What have you to answer?" asked the investigating magistrate.

"That I am innocent, sir; I swear that I am innocent!"

"I hope you are," said M. Patrigent, "and you may count upon me to assist you, to the extent of my ability, in proving your innocence. You must have some facts to allege in your defense, some proofs you can furnish me with."

"Ah, sir, what can I say when I am myself unable to understand this dreadful business? I can only refer you to my past life."

The magistrate interrupted him: "Let us be specific; the robbery was committed under circumstances that prevent suspicion

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from falling upon any one but M. Fauvel and yourself. Do you suspect any one else?"

"No, sir."

"You declare yourself to be innocent, therefore the guilty party must be M. Fauvel." Prosper remained silent. "Have you," persisted the magistrate, "any cause for believing that M. Fauvel robbed himself?" The prisoner preserved a rigid silence.

"I see," said the magistrate, "that you need time for reflection. Listen to the reading of your examination, and after signing it you will return to prison."

The unhappy man was overcome. The last ray of hope was gone. He heard nothing of what Sigault read, and he signed the paper without looking at it. He tottered as he left the magistrate's room, so that the agent who had him in charge was forced to support him. "I fear your case looks bad," said the man, "but don't be disheartened; keep up your courage."

Courage! Prosper had not a spark of it when he returned to his cell; but his heart was filled with anger and resentment. He had determined that he would defend himself before the magistrate, that he would prove his innocence; and he had not had time to do so. He reproached himself bitterly for having trusted to the magistrate's benevolent face. "What a farce," he angrily exclaimed, "to call that an examination!"

It was not really an examination that Prosper had been subjected to, but a mere formality. In summoning him, M. Patrigent obeyed Article 93 of the Criminal Code, which says, "Every suspected person under arrest must be examined within twenty-four hours." But it is not in twenty-four hours, especially in a case like this, with no evidence or material proof, that a magistrate can collect the materials for an examination. To triumph over the obstinate defense of a prisoner who shuts himself up in absolute denial as though in a fortress, valid proofs are needed. These weapons M. Patrigent was busily preparing.

If Prosper had remained a little longer in the gallery, he would have seen the same official who had called him come from the magistrate's room, and cry out, No. 3. The witness who was awaiting his turn, and answered the call for No. 3, was M. Fauvel.

The banker was no longer the same man. Yesterday he was kind and affable in his manner; now, as he entered the magis-

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trate's room, he seemed irritated against his cashier. Reflection, which usually brings calmness and a desire to pardon, had in his case led to anger and a thirst for vengeance. The inevitable questions which commence every examination had scarcely been addressed to him before his impetuous temper gained the mastery, and he burst forth in invectives against Prosper.

M. Patrigent was obliged to impose silence upon the banker, reminding him of what was due to himself, no matter what wrongs he had suffered at the hands of his clerk. Although he had very slightly examined Prosper, the magistrate was now scrupulously attentive and particular in having every question answered. Prosper's examination had been a mere formality, the verifying of a positive fact. M. Patrigent now occupied himself in ferreting out all the attendant circumstances and the most trifling particulars, in order to group them together, and arrive at a just conclusion.

"Let us proceed with regularity," said the magistrate to M. Fauvel, "and pray confine yourself to answering my questions. Did you ever suspect your cashier of being dishonest?"

"Certainly not. Yet there were reasons which should have made me hesitate to trust him."

"What reasons?"

"M. Bertomy gambled. I have known of his spending whole nights at the card-table, and losing large sums of money. He was intimate with an unprincipled set. Once he was mixed up with one of my customers, M. de Clameran, in a scandalous gambling affair at the house of some disreputable woman, and which ended in an investigation at the police court."

For some minutes the banker continued to revile Prosper. "You must confess, sir," interrupted the magistrate, "that you were very imprudent, if not culpable, to have entrusted the contents of your safe to such a man."

"Ah, sir, Prosper was not always thus. Until the past year he was a perfect model for men of his age. He frequented my house as one of my family; he spent all of his evenings with us, and was the bosom friend of my eldest son Lucien. One day he suddenly left us, and never came to the house again. Yet I had every reason to believe him to be attached to my niece Madeleine."

M. Patrigent had an odd way of contracting his brows when he thought he had discovered some new proof. He now did

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this, and said: "Might not this admiration for the young lady have been the cause of M. Bertomy's estrangement?"

"How so?" asked the banker with surprise. "I was willing to bestow Madeleine's hand upon him, and, to be frank, was astonished that he did not ask for her in marriage. My niece would be a good match for any man, and he should have considered himself fortunate in obtaining her. She is very handsome, and her dowry will be half a million."

"Then you can discover no motive for your cashier's conduct?"

"It is impossible for me to account for it. I have, however, always supposed that Prosper was led astray by a young man whom he met at my house about that time, M. Raoul de Lagors."

"Ah! and who is this young man?"

"A relative of my wife's; a very attractive, intelligent young man, somewhat wild, but rich enough to pay for his follies."

The magistrate wrote the name Lagors at the bottom of an already long list of his memoranda. "Now," he said, "let us come to the point. You are sure that the theft was not committed by any one of your household?"

"Quite sure, sir."

"You always kept your key?"

"I generally carried it about on my person; and whenever I left it at home, I placed it in the drawer of the secretary in my bedroom."

"Where was it on the evening of the robbery?"

"In my secretary."

"But then—"

"Excuse me for interrupting you," said M. Fauvel, "and permit me to tell you that, to a safe like mine, the key is of no importance. To open it, one must know the word upon which the five movable buttons turn. With the word one can even open it without the key; but without the word—"

"And you never told this word to any one?"

"To no one, sir, and sometimes I should have been puzzled to know myself with what word the safe had been closed. Prosper would change it when he chose, and then inform me of the change, but I often forgot it."

"Had you forgotten it on the day of the theft?"

"No; the word had been changed the day before; and its peculiarity struck me."

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"What was it?"

"Gipsy—g-i-p-s-y," said the banker, spelling the name.

M. Patrigent wrote down this name. "One more question, sir," said he, "were you at home the evening before the robbery?"

"No; I dined and spent the evening with a friend; when I returned home, about one o'clock, my wife had retired, and I went to bed immediately."

"And you were not aware of the amount of money in the safe?"

"Absolutely. In conformity with my positive orders, I could only suppose that a small sum had been left there overnight; I stated this fact to the commissary in M. Bertomy's presence, and he acknowledged it to be the case."

"It is perfectly correct, sir: the commissary's report proves it." M. Patrigent was for a time silent. To him everything depended upon this one fact, that the banker was unaware of the three hundred and fifty thousand francs being in the safe, and Prosper had disobeyed orders by placing them there overnight; hence the conclusion was very easily drawn.

Seeing that his examination was over, the banker thought he would relieve his mind of what was weighing upon it. "I believe myself above suspicion, sir," he began, "and yet I can never rest easy until Bertomy's guilt has been clearly proved. Calumny prefers attacking a successful man, and I may be calumniated: three hundred and fifty thousand francs is a fortune capable of tempting even a rich man. I should be obliged if you would have the condition of my affairs strictly examined. This examination will prove that I could have had no interest in robbing my own safe. The prosperous condition—"

"That is sufficient, sir."

M. Patrigent was already well informed of the high standing of the banker, and knew almost as much of his affairs as M. Fauvel himself. He asked him to sign his testimony, and then escorted him to the door of his office, a rare favor on his part.

When M. Fauvel had left the room, Sigault indulged in a remark. "This seems to be a very cloudy case," he said; "if the cashier is shrewd and firm, it will be difficult to convict him."

"Perhaps it will," said the magistrate; "but let us hear what the other witnesses have to say."

The person who answered to the call for No. 4 was Lucien,

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M. Fauvel's eldest son. He was a tall, handsome young man of twenty-two. To the magistrate's questions he replied that he was very fond of Prosper, was once very intimate with him, and had always regarded him as a strictly honorable man, incapable of doing anything unbecoming a gentleman. He declared that he could not imagine what fatal circumstances could have induced Prosper to commit the theft. He knew that he played cards, but not to the extent that was reported. He had never known him to indulge in expenses beyond his means. In regard to his cousin Madeleine, he replied: "I always thought that Prosper was in love with Madeleine, and, until yesterday, I was certain he would marry her, knowing that my father would not oppose their union. I have always attributed the discontinuance of Prosper's visits to a quarrel with my cousin, but supposed they would ultimately become reconciled."

This information threw more light upon Prosper's past life than that furnished by M. Fauvel, but did not apparently disclose any evidence which could be used in the present state of affairs. Lucien signed his deposition, and withdrew.

Cavaillon's turn for examination came next. The poor fellow was in a pitiable state of mind when he appeared before the magistrate. Having confided to a friend his adventure with the detective, as a great secret, and being jeered at for his cowardice in giving up the note, he felt great remorse, and passed the night in reproaching himself for having ruined Prosper. He endeavored to repair, as well as he could, what he called his treason. He did not exactly accuse M. Fauvel, but he courageously declared that he was the cashier's friend, and that he was as certain of his innocence as he was of his own. Unfortunately, besides having no proofs to strengthen his assertions, the latter were deprived of most of their value by his violent professions of friendship for the accused.

After Cavaillon, six or eight clerks of Fauvel's bank successively defiled in the magistrate's room; but their depositions were nearly all insignificant. One of them, however, stated a fact which the magistrate carefully noted. He said he knew that Prosper had speculated on the Bourse through the medium of M. Raoul de Lagors, and had gained immense sums. Five o'clock struck before the list of witnesses summoned for the day was exhausted. But M. Patrigent's task was not yet finished. He rang for his attendant, who instantly appeared, when he said to him: "Go at once and bring Fanferlot."

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It was some time before the detective answered the summons. Having met a colleague in the gallery, he thought it his duty to treat him; and the official had to fetch him from the wine-shop at the corner.

"How is it that you keep people waiting?" said the magistrate, when the detective entered bowing and scraping. Fanferlot bowed more profoundly still. Despite his smiling face, he was very uneasy. To unravel the Bertomy case alone, it was requisite to play a double game that might be discovered at any moment. In serving at the same time the cause of justice and his own ambition, he ran great risks, the least of which was the losing of his place.

"I have had a great deal to do," he said, to excuse himself, "and have not wasted any time." And he began to give a detailed account of his movements. He was embarrassed, for he spoke with all sorts of restrictions, picking out what was to be said, and avoiding what was to be left unsaid. Thus he gave the history of Cavaillon's letter, which he handed to the magistrate; but he did not breathe a word of Madeleine. On the other hand, he furnished minute biographical details of Prosper and Madame Gipsy, which he had collected from various quarters during the day.

As the detective progressed, M. Patrigent's conviction was strengthened. "This young man is evidently guilty," he murmured. Fanferlot did not reply; his opinion was different, but he was delighted that the magistrate was on the wrong track, thinking that his own glorification would thereby be the greater when he discovered the real culprit. True, this grand discovery was as far off as it had ever been.

After hearing all he had to say, the magistrate dismissed Fanferlot, telling him to return the next day. "Above all," he said, as Fanferlot left the room, "do not lose sight of the woman Gipsy; she must know where the money is, and can put us on the right scent."

Fanferlot smiled cunningly. "You may rest easy about that, sir," replied he; "the lady is in good hands."

Left to himself, although the evening was far advanced, M. Patrigent continued to busy himself with the case, and to arrange for the rest of the depositions being taken. The affair had obtained complete possession of his mind; it was, at the same time, puzzling and attractive. It seemed to be surrounded by a cloud of mystery, which he determined to penetrate and dispel.

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The next morning he was in his room much earlier than usual. On this day he examined Madame Gipsy, recalled Cavaillon, and sent again for M. Fauvel. For several days he displayed the same activity. Of all the witnesses summoned, only two failed to appear. One was the messenger sent by Prosper to bring the money from the Bank of France, and who was ill from a fall. The other was M. Raoul de Lagors. But their absence did not prevent the memoranda relating to Prosper's case from daily increasing; and on the ensuing Monday, five days after the robbery, M. Patrigent thought he held in his hands enough moral proof to crush the accused.

V

WHILE his whole past was the object of the most minute investigations, Prosper was in prison, in solitary confinement. The two first days had not appeared very long to him. He had requested, and been supplied with some sheets of paper, numbered, for they had to be accounted for; and he wrote, with a sort of fury, plans of defense and a narrative of justification.

The third day he began to feel uneasy at not seeing any one except the condemned prisoners employed to serve those undergoing solitary confinement, and the jailer who brought him his food. "Am I not to be examined again?" he would ask.

"Your turn is coming," the jailer invariably answered.

Time passed; and the wretched man, tortured by the sufferings of solitary confinement which quickly breaks the spirit, sank into the depths of despair. "Am I to stay here forever?" he moaned.

No, he was not forgotten; for on the Monday morning, at one o'clock, an hour when the jailer never came, he heard the heavy bolt of his cell pushed back. He ran toward the door. But the sight of a gray-headed man standing there rooted him to the spot.

"Father," he gasped, "father!"

"Your father, yes!"

Prosper's astonishment at seeing his father was instantly suc-

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ceeded by a feeling of great joy. A father is the one friend upon whom we can always rely. In the hour of need, when all else fails, we remember him upon whose knees we sat when children, and who soothed our sorrows; and even though he may be unable to assist us, his mere presence serves to comfort and strengthen us.

Without reflecting, Prosper, impelled by tender feeling, was about to throw himself into his father's arms, but M. Bertomy harshly repulsed him. "Do not approach me!" he exclaimed. He then advanced into the cell, and closed the door. The father and son were alone together—Prosper heart-broken, crushed; M. Bertomy angry, almost threatening.

Cast off by his last friend, by his father, the miserable young man seemed to be stupefied with pain and disappointment. "You, too!" he bitterly cried. "You—you believe me guilty? Oh, father!"

"Spare yourself this shameful comedy," interrupted M. Bertomy: "I know all."

"But I am innocent, father; I swear it by the sacred memory of my mother."

"Unhappy wretch!" cried M. Bertomy, "do not blaspheme!" He seemed overcome by tender thoughts of the past, and in a weak, broken voice added: "Your mother is dead, Prosper, and little did I think that the day would come when I could thank God for having taken her from me. Your crime would have killed her, would have broken her heart!"

After a painful silence, Prosper said: "You overwhelm me, father, and at the moment when I need all my courage; when I am the victim of a hideous plot."

"Victim!" cried M. Bertomy, "victim! Dare you utter your insinuations against the honorable man who has taken care of you, loaded you with benefits, and had ensured you a brilliant future! It is enough for you to have robbed him; do not calumniate him."

"For pity's sake, father, let me explain!"

"I suppose you would deny your benefactor's kindness. Yet you were at one time so sure of his affection that you wrote me to hold myself in readiness to come to Paris and ask M. Fauvel for the hand of his niece. Was that, then, a lie?"

"No," said Prosper in a choked voice, "no."

"That was a year ago; you then loved Mademoiselle Madeleine; at least you told me so."

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"Father, I love her now, more than ever; I have never ceased to love her."

M. Bertomy made a gesture of contemptuous pity. "Indeed!" he cried. "And the thought of the pure, innocent girl whom you loved did not prevent your entering upon a path of sin. You loved her! How dared you, then, without blushing, approach her presence after associating with the shameless creatures with whom you were so intimate?"

"For heaven's sake, let me explain by what fatality Madeleine—"

"Enough, sir, enough. I told you that I know everything. I saw M. Fauvel yesterday; this morning I saw the magistrate, and 'tis to his kindness that I am indebted for this interview. Do you know what mortification I suffered before being allowed to see you? I was searched and made to empty all my pockets. They suspected I was conveying some weapon to you!"

Prosper ceased to justify himself, but in a helpless, dejected way dropped down upon a seat.

"I have seen your apartments, and at once recognized the proofs of your crime. I saw silk curtains hanging before all the windows and doors and the walls covered with pictures. In my father's house the walls were whitewashed; and there was but one armchair in the whole place, and that was my mother's. Our luxury was our honesty. You are the first member of our family who has possessed Aubusson carpets; though, to be sure, you are the first thief of our blood." At this last insult Prosper's face flushed crimson, but he remained silent and immovable.

"But luxury is necessary now," continued M. Bertomy, becoming more excited and angry as he went on; "luxury must be had at any price. You must have the insolent opulence and display of an upstart, without the upstart's wealth. You must support worthless women who wear satin slippers lined with swan's-down, like those I saw in your rooms, and keep servants in livery—and to do this you steal! Bankers will no longer dare trust the keys of their safes with any one, for every day honest families are disgraced by the discovery of some new piece of villainy."

M. Bertomy suddenly stopped. He saw for the first time that his son was not in a condition to hear his reproaches. "But I will say no more," he added. "I came here not to reproach you, but to save, if possible, the honor of our name, to prevent

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it from being published in the papers among the names of thieves and murderers. Stand up and listen to me!" At his father's imperious tone, Prosper arose. So many successive blows had reduced him to a state of torpor.

"First of all," began M. Bertomy, "how much have you remaining of the stolen three hundred and fifty thousand francs?"

"Once more, father," replied the unfortunate man in a tone of hopeless resignation, "once more I swear I am innocent."

"So I supposed you would say. Then our family will have to repair the injury you have done M. Fauvel."

"What do you mean?"

"The day your brother-in-law heard of your crime he brought me your sister's dowry—seventy thousand francs. I succeeded in collecting a hundred and forty thousand francs more. This makes two hundred and ten thousand francs which I have brought with me to give to M. Fauvel."

This threat aroused Prosper from his torpor. "You shall do nothing of the kind!" he cried with unrestrained indignation.

"I will do so before the sun goes down this day. M. Fauvel will grant me time to pay the rest. My pension is fifteen hundred francs. I can live upon five hundred; I am strong enough to go to work again; and your brother-in-law—" M. Bertomy stopped short, frightened at the expression of his son's face. His features were contracted with such furious rage that he was scarcely recognizable, and his eyes glared like a maniac's.

"You dare not disgrace me thus!" cried Prosper; "you have no right to do it. You are free to disbelieve me yourself, but you have no right to take a step which would be a confession of guilt, and ruin me forever. Who and what convinces you of my guilt? When cold justice hesitates, you, my father, hesitate not, but, more pitiless than the law, condemn me unheard!"

"I will do my duty!"

"Which means that I stand on the edge of a precipice, and you push me over! Do you call that your duty? What! between strangers who accuse me, and myself who swear that I am innocent, you do not hesitate? Why? Is it because I am your son? Our honor is at stake, it is true; but that is only the more reason why you should stand by me, and assist me to defend myself."

Prosper's earnest, truthful manner was enough to unsettle the firmest convictions, and make doubt penetrate the most

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stubborn mind. "Yet," said M. Bertomy in a hesitating tone, "everything seems to accuse you."

"Ah, father, you do not know that I was suddenly banished from Madeleine's presence; that I was compelled to avoid her. I became desperate, and tried to forget my sorrow in dissipation. I sought oblivion, and found shame and disgust. Oh, Madeleine, Madeleine!" He was overcome with emotion; but in a few minutes he resumed with renewed violence in his voice and manner: "Everything *is* against me; but no matter. I will clear myself or perish. Human justice is liable to error; although innocent, I may be convicted; so be it. I will undergo my penalty; but people are not kept galley-slaves forever."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, father, that I am now another man. My life, henceforth, has an object—vengeance! I am the victim of a vile plot. As long as I have a drop of blood in my veins, I will seek its author. And I will certainly find him; and then bitterly shall he expiate all of my cruel suffering. The blow has come from Fauvel's, and I will seek the villain there."

"Take care: your anger makes you say things that you will repent hereafter."

"Yes, I see, you are going to descant upon the probity of M. Andre Fauvel. You will tell me that all the virtues have taken refuge in the bosom of this patriarchal family. What do you know about it? Would this be the first instance in which the most shameful secrets are concealed beneath the fairest appearances? Why did Madeleine suddenly forbid me to think of her? Why has she exiled me, when she suffers as much from our separation as I myself, when she still loves me? For she does love me. I am sure of it. I have proofs of it."

The jailer here came to say that the time allotted to M. Bertomy had expired, and that he must leave the cell. A thousand conflicting emotions seemed to rend the old man's heart. Suppose Prosper were telling the truth: how great would be his own remorse, if he had added to the frightful weight of sorrow and trouble his son already had to bear! And who could prove that he was not sincere in what he said?

The voice of his son, of whom he had ever been proud, had aroused all his paternal affection which he had so violently repressed. Ah, were he guilty, and guilty of a worse crime, still he was his son, his only son! His countenance lost its severity, and his eyes filled with tears. He wished to leave

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as he had entered, stern and angry, but he had not the cruel courage. His heart was breaking. He opened his arms, and pressed Prosper to his breast. "Oh, my son!" he murmured, "God grant you have spoken the truth!"

Prosper was triumphant: he had almost convinced his father of his innocence. But he had no time to rejoice over this victory. The cell door again opened, and the jailer's gruff voice called out: "It is time for you to appear before the investigating magistrate."

Prosper instantly obeyed the summons. His step was no longer unsteady, as a few days previous: a complete change had come over him. He walked firmly, with his head erect, and the fire of resolution in his eye. He knew the way now, and he proceeded a little ahead of the officer who escorted him. As he was passing through the room full of police agents, he encountered the individual with the gold spectacles, who had watched him so intently the day he was searched. "Courage, M. Prosper Bertomy," he said; "if you are innocent, there are those who will help you."

Prosper started with surprise, and was about to reply, when the man disappeared. "Who is that gentleman?" he asked of the officer who was escorting him.

"Is it possible that you don't know him?" replied the man with surprise. "Why, it is M. Lecoq of the detective service."

"You say his name is Lecoq?"

"You might as well say 'Monsieur Lecoq,'" said the offended official; "it would not burn your mouth. M. Lecoq is a man who knows everything that he wants to know, without its ever being told to him. If your case had been in his hands instead of in those of that smooth-tongued, imbecile Fanferlot, it would have been settled long ago. Nobody is allowed to waste time when he is in command. But he seems to be a friend of yours."

"I never saw him until the first day I came here."

"You can't swear to that, because no one can boast of knowing the real face of M. Lecoq. It is one thing to-day, and another to-morrow; sometimes he is a dark man, sometimes a fair one, sometimes quite young, and then an octogenarian. Why, at times he even deceives me. I begin to talk to a stranger—bah! it turns out to be M. Lecoq! Anybody on the face of the earth might be he. If I were told that you were he, I should say: 'Very likely it is so.' Ah! he can convert himself into any form he pleases. He is a wonderful man!"

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The speaker would have continued forever his praises of M. Lecoq, had not the sight of the magistrate's room put an end to them.

This time, Prosper was not kept waiting on the wooden bench; on the contrary, the magistrate was waiting for him. M. Patrigent, who was a profound observer of human nature, had contrived the interview between M. Bertomy and his son. He was certain that between the father, a man of such stubborn honor, and the son, accused of theft, an affecting scene would take place, and this scene would completely unman Prosper, and induce him to confess. He determined to send for him as soon as the interview was over, while his nerves were vibrating with terrible emotions: he would then tell the truth, to relieve his troubled, despairing mind.

The magistrate's surprise therefore was great to see the cashier's bearing; resolute without obstinacy, firm and assured without defiance. "Well," he said to him, "have you reflected?"

"Not being guilty, sir, I had nothing to reflect upon."

"Ah, I see the prison has not been a good counselor; you forget that sincerity and repentance are the first things necessary to obtain the indulgence of the law."

"I crave no indulgence, sir."

M. Patrigent looked vexed, and said: "What would you say if I told you what had become of the three hundred and fifty thousand francs?"

Prosper shook his head sadly. "If it were known, sir, I should not be here, but at liberty."

This device had often been used by the magistrate, and had generally succeeded; but, with a man so thoroughly master of himself as Prosper then was, there was small chance of success on this occasion. It had been used at a venture, and had failed. "Then you persist in accusing M. Fauvel?" remarked M. Patrigent.

"Him, or some one else."

"Excuse me: no one else, since he alone knew the word. Had he any interest in robbing himself?"

"I can think of none."

"Well, now I will tell you what interest you had in robbing him."

M. Patrigent spoke as a man who was convinced of the facts he was about to state; but his assurance was all assumed. He had relied upon crushing at a blow a despairing, wretched

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man, and was nonplused by seeing him appear so determined upon resistance. "Will you be good enough to tell me," he said in a vexed tone, "how much you have spent during the last year?"

Prosper did not find it necessary to stop to reflect and calculate. "Yes, sir," he answered, unhesitatingly. "Circumstances made it necessary for me to preserve the greatest order in my wild career; I spent about fifty thousand francs."

"Where did you obtain them?"

"In the first place, twelve thousand francs were left to me by my mother. I received from M. Fauvel fourteen thousand francs for my salary, and share of the profits. By speculating on the Bourse I gained eight thousand francs. The rest I borrowed, and intend repaying out of the fifteen thousand francs which I have deposited in M. Fauvel's bank." The account was clear, exact, and could be easily proved; it must be a true one.

"Who lent you the money?" inquired M. Patrigent.

"M. Raoul de Lagors." This witness had left Paris the day of the robbery, and could not be found; so for the time being, M. Patrigent was compelled to rely upon Prosper's word.

"Well," he said, "I will not press this point. Tell me why, in spite of M. Fauvel's formal order, you drew the money from the Bank of France the night before, instead of waiting till the morning of the payment?"

"Because M. de Clameran had informed me that it would be convenient, necessary even, for him to have his money early in the morning. He will testify to that fact, if you summon him; and I knew that I should reach my office late."

"Then M. de Clameran is a friend of yours?"

"By no means. I have always had an aversion to him, which there was nothing whatever to justify; he is, however, the intimate friend of M. de Lagors."

While Sigault was writing down these answers, M. Patrigent was racking his brain to imagine what could have occurred between M. Bertomy and his son to cause this transformation in Prosper. "One thing more," said the magistrate: "how did you spend your evening the night of the crime?"

"When I left my office, at five o'clock, I took the St. Germain train, and went to Vesinet to M. de Lagors's country house, to return him fifteen hundred francs which he had asked for; and, not finding him at home, I left the money with his servant."

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"Did the latter tell you that M. de Lagors was going away?"
"No, sir. I did not know that he had left Paris."
"Where did you go when you left Vesinet?"
"I returned to Paris, and dined at a restaurant with a friend."
"And then?" Prosper hesitated.
"You are silent," said M. Patrigent. "I will therefore tell you how you employed your time. You returned to your rooms in the Rue Chaptal, dressed yourself, and went to a party given by one of those women who style themselves dramatic artists, and who are a disgrace to the stage; who receive salaries of a hundred crowns a year, and yet keep their carriages. You went to Mademoiselle Wilson's."

"You are right, sir."

"There is heavy playing at Wilson's?"

"Sometimes."

"You are in the habit of visiting places of this sort. Were you not connected in some way with a scandalous affair which took place at the house of a woman named Crescenzi?"

"I was summoned to give evidence, having been witness of a theft."

"Gambling generally leads to stealing. And did you not play baccarat at Wilson's, and lose eighteen hundred francs?"

"Excuse me, sir, only eleven hundred."

"Very well. In the morning you paid a bill that fell due of a thousand francs."

"Yes, sir."

"Moreover, there remained in your desk five hundred francs, and you had four hundred in your purse when you were arrested. So that altogether, in twenty-four hours, four thousand five hundred francs—"

Prosper was not discountenanced, but amazed. Not being aware of the powerful means of investigation which the law has at its command, he wondered how the magistrate could have obtained such accurate information in so short a time.

"Your statement is correct, sir," he finally said.

"Where did all this money come from? The evening before you had so little that you were obliged to defer the payment of a small account."

"The day to which you allude I sold some bonds I had, through an agent, which realized about three thousand francs. In addition I took from the safe two thousand francs in advance of my salary. I have nothing to conceal."

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Prosper had given clear answers to all questions put to him, and M. Patrigent thought he would now attack him from a new point. "You say you have no wish to conceal any of your actions; then why this note stealthily thrown to one of your companions?" Here he held up the mysterious note.

This time the blow struck. Prosper's eyes dropped before the inquiring look of the magistrate. "I thought," he stammered, "I wished—"

"You wished to hide your mistress?"

"Well, yes, sir, I did. I knew that a man in my condition, accused of a robbery, has every fault, every weakness he has ever indulged in, charged against him as a great crime."

"Which means that you knew that the presence of a woman at your apartments would tell very much against you, and that justice would not excuse this scandalous defiance of public morality. A man who respects himself so little as to live with a worthless woman does not elevate her to his standard, but descends to her base level."

"Sir!"

"I suppose you know who the woman is, whom you permit to bear the honest name borne by your mother?"

"Madame Gipsy was a governess when I first knew her. She was born at Oporto, and came to France with a Portuguese family."

"Her name is not Gipsy: she has never been a governess, and she is not a Portuguese."

Prosper began to protest against this statement; but M. Patrigent shrugged his shoulders, and after looking over a lot of papers on his desk, said: "Ah, here it is; listen: Palmyre Chocareille, born at Paris in 1840, daughter of James Chocareille, undertaker's assistant, and of Caroline Piedlent, his wife."

Prosper looked vexed and impatient; he was not aware that the magistrate was reading him this report in order to convince him that nothing can escape the police. "Palmyre Chocareille," continued M. Patrigent, "was apprenticed at twelve years of age to a shoemaker, and remained with him until she was sixteen. Traces of her for one year are lost. At the age of seventeen she was hired as a servant by a grocer in the Rue St. Denis, named Dombas, and remained with him three months. She entered during this same year, 1857, eight different situations. In 1858 she entered the service of a dealer in fans in the Passage Choiseul."

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As he read, the magistrate watched Prosper's face to observe the effect of these revelations. "Toward the close of 1858," continued he, "she was employed as a servant by Madame Nunes, and accompanied her to Lisbon. How long she remained in Lisbon, and what she did while she remained there, is not reported. But in 1861 she returned to Paris, and was sentenced to three months' imprisonment for assault and battery. Ah, she returned from Portugal with the name of Nina Gipsy."

"But I assure you, sir—" Prosper began.

"Yes, I understand: this history is less romantic, doubtless, than the one related to you; but then it has the merit of being true. We lose sight of Palmyre Chocareille, called Gipsy, upon her release from prison; but we meet her again six months later, she having made the acquaintance of a commercial traveler named Caldas, who became infatuated with her beauty, and furnished some rooms for her near the Bastille. She assumed his name for some time, then she deserted him to devote herself to you. Did you ever hear of this Caldas?"

"Never, sir."

"This foolish man so deeply loved this creature that her desertion drove him almost insane through grief. He was very resolute, and publicly swore that he would kill his rival if he ever found him. The current report afterward was, that he committed suicide. He certainly sold the furniture of the house occupied by the woman Chocareille, and suddenly disappeared. All the efforts made to discover him proved fruitless."

The magistrate paused a moment as if to give Prosper time for reflection, and then slowly said: "And this is the woman whom you made your companion, the woman for whom you robbed the bank!"

Once more M. Patrigent was on the wrong track, owing to Fanferlot's incomplete information. He had hoped that Prosper would betray himself by uttering some passionate retort when thus wounded to the quick; but the latter remained impassible. Of all that the magistrate had said to him his mind dwelt upon only one word—"Caldas," the name of the poor commercial traveler who had killed himself.

"At any rate," insisted M. Patrigent, "you will confess that this girl has caused your ruin."

"I can not confess that, sir, for it is not true."

"Yet she is the cause of your extravagance. "Listen"—the

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magistrate here drew a bill from the file of papers—"during December you paid her dressmaker, Van Klopen, for two out-door costumes, nine hundred francs; one evening dress, seven hundred francs; one domino, trimmed with lace, four hundred francs."

"I spent that money of my own free will; but, nevertheless, I was not in the least attached to her."

M. Patrigent shrugged his shoulders. "You can not deny the evidence," said he. "I suppose you will also say that it was not for this girl's sake you ceased spending your evenings at M. Fauvel's?"

"I assure you that she was not the cause of my ceasing to visit M. Fauvel's family."

"Then why did you suddenly break off your attentions to a young lady whom you confidently expected to marry, and whose hand you had written to your father to ask for you?"

"I had reasons which I can not reveal," answered Prosper with emotion.

The magistrate breathed freely; at last he had discovered a vulnerable point in the prisoner's armor. "Did Mademoiselle Madeleine banish you from her presence?" Prosper was silent, and seemed agitated. "Speak," said M. Patrigent; "I must tell you that this is one of the most important circumstances in your case."

"Whatever the cost may be, on this subject I am compelled to keep silence."

"Beware of what you do; justice will not be satisfied with scruples of conscience." M. Patrigent waited for an answer. None came.

"You persist in your obstinacy, do you?" continued he. "Well, we will go on to the next question. You have, during the last year, spent fifty thousand francs. Your resources are at an end, and your credit is exhausted; to continue your mode of life was impossible. What did you intend to do?"

"I had no settled plan. I thought it might last as long as it would, and then I—"

"And then you would abstract money from the safe; was it not so?"

"Ah, sir, if I were guilty I should not be here! I should never have been such a fool as to return to the bank; I should have fled."

M. Patrigent could not restrain a smile of satisfaction, and

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exclaimed: "Exactly the argument I expected you to use. You showed your shrewdness precisely by staying to face the storm, instead of flying the country. Several recent cases have taught dishonest cashiers that flight abroad is dangerous. Railways travel fast, but telegrams travel faster. A French thief can be arrested in London within forty-eight hours after his description has been telegraphed. Even America is no longer a refuge. You remained, prudently and wisely, saying to yourself: 'I will manage to avoid suspicion; and, even if I am found out, I shall be free again after three or five years' seclusion, with a large fortune to enjoy.' Many people would sacrifice five years of their lives for three hundred and fifty thousand francs."

"But, sir, had I calculated in the manner you describe, I should not have been content with three hundred and fifty thousand francs—I should have waited for an opportunity to steal a million. I often had that sum in my charge."

"Oh! it is not always convenient to wait."

Prosper was buried in deep thought for some minutes. "Sir," he finally said, "there is one detail I forgot to mention before, and it may be of importance."

"Explain, if you please."

"The messenger whom I sent to the Bank of France for the money must have seen me tie up the bundles of notes and put them away in the safe. At any rate, he knows that I left my office before he did."

"Very well; the man shall be examined. Now you can return to your cell; and once more I advise you to consider the consequences of your persistent denial." M. Patrigent thus abruptly dismissed Prosper because he wished to act immediately upon this last piece of information.

"Sigault," said he, as soon as Prosper had left the room, "is not this messenger the man who was excused from being examined from his having sent a doctor's certificate declaring him too ill to appear?"

"It is, sir."

"Where does he live?"

"Fanferlot says he was so ill that he was taken to the hospital—the Dubois Hospital."

"Very good. I am going to examine him to-day, this very hour. Take your pen and paper, and send for a cab."

It was some distance from the Palais de Justice to the Dubois Hospital; but the cabman, urged by the promise of a handsome

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present for himself, made his sorry jades fly as if they were blood horses.

Would the messenger be able to answer any questions? That was the point. The physician in charge of the hospital said that, although the man suffered severely from a broken knee, his mind was perfectly clear. "That being the case," said the magistrate, "I wish to examine him, and desire that no one be admitted while he makes his deposition."

"Oh! you will not be intruded upon; his room contains four beds, but with the exception of his own they are just now all unoccupied."

When the messenger saw the magistrate enter, followed by a tall, thin young man with a portfolio under his arm, he at once knew what they had come for. "Ah," he said, "you have come to see me about M. Bertomy's affair?"—"Precisely."

M. Patrigent remained standing by the sick-bed while Sigault arranged his papers on a little table. In answer to the usual questions, the messenger stated that he was named Antonin Poche, was forty years old, born at Cadaujac in the Gironde, and was unmarried.

"Now," said the magistrate, "are you well enough to answer clearly any questions I may put to you?"

"Yes, certainly, sir."

"Did you, on the 27th of February, go to the Bank of France for the three hundred and fifty thousand francs that were stolen?"—"Yes, sir."

"At what hour did you return with the money?"

"It must have been five o'clock when I got back."

"Do you remember what M. Bertomy did when you handed him the notes? Now, do not be in a hurry; think before you answer the question."

"Let me see: first he counted the notes, and made them up into four packages; then he put them in the safe, which he afterward locked, and then—it seems to me—yes, I am not mistaken, he went out!"

He uttered these last words with so much energy that, forgetting his knee, he half started up in bed, giving vent at the same time to a cry of pain.

"Are you sure of what you say?" asked the magistrate.

M. Patrigent's solemn tone seemed to frighten Antonin. "Sure!" he exclaimed with marked hesitation; "I would bet my head on it, yet I am not more sure than that!"

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It was impossible to get him to be more precise in his answers. He had been frightened. He already imagined himself compromised, and for a trifle would have retracted everything. But the effect was none the less produced, and when they retired M. Patrigent said to Sigault: "This is a very important piece of evidence."

VI

THE hotel of the Grand Archangel, Madame Gipsy's asylum, was the most elegant one on the Quai St. Michel. At this hotel a person who pays her fortnight's board in advance is treated with marked consideration.

Madame Alexandre, who had been a handsome woman, was now stout, laced till she could scarcely breathe, always overdressed, and fond of wearing a number of flashy gold chains around her fat neck. She had bright eyes and white teeth; but, alas, a red nose. Of all her weaknesses—and heaven knows she had indulged in every variety—only one remained; she loved a good dinner, washed down with plenty of good wine. But she loved her husband; and, about the time M. Patrigent was leaving the hospital, she began to feel worried because her "little man" had not returned to dinner. She was about to sit down without him, when the waiter cried out: "Here is master." And Fanferlot appeared in person.

Three years before, Fanferlot had kept a little private inquiry office; Madame Alexandre dealt without a license in perfumery and toilet articles, and, finding it necessary to have some of her doubtful customers watched, engaged Fanferlot's services; this was the origin of their acquaintance.

If they went through the marriage ceremony for the good of the mayoralty and the church, it was because they imagined it would, like a baptism, wash out the sins of the past. Upon this momentous day Fanferlot gave up his private inquiry office, and entered the police, where he had already been occasionally employed, and Madame Alexandre retired from business.

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Uniting their savings, they hired and furnished the Grand Archangel, which they were now carrying on prosperously, esteemed by their neighbors, who were ignorant of Fanferlot's connection with the police force.

"Why, how late you are, my little man!" exclaimed Madame Alexandre as she dropped her knife and fork, and rushed forward to embrace her husband.

Fanferlot received her caresses with an air of abstraction. "My back is broken," he said. "I have been the whole day playing billiards with Evariste, M. Fauvel's valet, and allowed him to win as often as he wished—a man who does not know what pool is! I became acquainted with him yesterday, and now I am his best friend. If I wish to enter M. Fauvel's service in Antonin's place, I can rely upon Evariste's good word."

"What, you be an office messenger? you?"

"Of course I would. How else am I to get an opportunity of studying my characters, if I am not on the spot to continually watch them?"

"Then the valet gave you no information?"

"None that I could make use of, and yet I turned him inside out like a glove. This banker is a remarkable man; you don't often meet with one of his sort nowadays. Evariste says he has not a single vice, not even a little defect by which his valet could gain ten sous. He neither smokes, drinks, nor plays; in fact, he is a saint. He is worth millions, and lives as respectably and quietly as a grocer He is devoted to his wife, adores his children, is very hospitable, but seldom goes into society."

"Then his wife is young?"

"No, she must be about fifty."

Madame Alexandre reflected a minute, then asked: "Did you inquire about the other members of the family?"

"Certainly. The younger son is in the army. The elder son, Lucien, lives with his parents, and is altogether as proper as a young lady. He is so good, indeed, that he is perfectly stupid."

"And what about the niece?"

"Evariste could tell me nothing about her."

Madame Alexandre shrugged her fat shoulders. "If you have discovered nothing," she said, "it is because there is nothing to be discovered. Still, do you know what I would do if I were you?"

"Tell me."

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"I would consult M. Lecoq."

Fanferlot jumped up as if he had been shot. "Now, that's pretty advice!" he exclaimed. "Do you want me to lose my place? M. Lecoq does not suspect that I have anything to do with the case, excepting to obey his orders."

"Nobody told you to let him know you were investigating it on your own account. You can consult him with an air of indifference, as if you were not at all interested; and, after you have got his opinion, you can take advantage of it."

The detective weighed his wife's words, and then said: "Perhaps you are right; yet M. Lecoq is so deucedly shrewd that he might see through me."

"Shrewd!" echoed Madame Alexandre; "shrewd! All of you at the Prefecture say that so often that he has gained his reputation by it. You are just as sharp as he is."

"Well, we will see. I will think the matter over; but, in the mean time, what does the girl say?" The "girl" was Madame Nina Gipsy.

In taking up her abode at the Grand Archangel, Madame Nina thought she was following good advice; and, as Fanferlot had never appeared in her presence since, she was still under the impression that she had obeyed a friend of Prosper's. When she received her summons from M. Patrigent, she admired the wonderful skill of the police in discovering her hiding-place; for she had established herself at the hotel under a false, or rather her true, name, Palmyre Chocareille. Artfully questioned by her inquisitive landlady, she had, without any mistrust, confided her history to her. Thus Fanferlot was able to impress the magistrate with the idea of his being a skilful detective, when he pretended to have discovered all this information from a variety of sources.

"She is still upstairs," replied Madame Alexandre. "She suspects nothing; but to keep her in the house becomes every day more difficult. I don't know what the magistrate told her, but she came home quite beside herself with anger. She wanted to go and make a fuss at M. Fauvel's. Then she wrote a letter, which she told Jean to post for her; but I kept it to show you."

"What!" interrupted Fanferlot, "you have a letter, and did not tell me before? Perhaps it contains the clue to the mystery. Give it to me, quick."

Obeying her husband, Madame Alexandre opened a little cup-

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board and took out a letter, which she handed to him. "Here, take it," she said, "and be satisfied."

Considering that she used to be a chambermaid, Palmyre Chocareille, since become Madame Gipsy, wrote well. Her letter bore the following address, written in a free, flowing hand:

"M. L. DE CLAMERAN,

"Forgemaster, Hotel du Louvre.

"To be handed to M. Raoul de Lagors.

"(Immediate.)"

"Oh, ho!" said Fanferlot, accompanying his exclamation with a little whistle, as was his habit when he thought he had made a grand discovery. "Oh, ho!"

"Are you going to open it?" inquired Madame Alexandre.

"A little bit," said Fanferlot, as he dexterously opened the envelope.

Madame Alexandre leaned over her husband's shoulder, and they both read the following:

"MONSIEUR RAOUL—Prosper is in prison, accused of a robbery which he never committed. I wrote to you three days ago."

"What!" interrupted Fanferlot, "this silly girl wrote, and I never saw the letter?"

"But, little man, she must have posted it herself the day she went to the Palais de Justice."

"Very likely," said Fanferlot, propitiated. He continued reading:

"I wrote to you three days ago, and have no reply. Who will help Prosper if his best friends desert him? If you don't answer this letter, I shall consider myself released from a certain promise, and without scruple will tell Prosper of the conversation I overheard between you and M. de Clameran. But I can count on you, can I not? I shall expect you at the Grand Archangel, on the Quai St. Michel, the day after tomorrow, between twelve and four. NINA GIPSY."

The letter read, Fanferlot at once proceeded to copy it.

"Well!" said Madame Alexandre, "what do you think?"

Fanferlot was delicately refastening the letter when the door of the hotel office was abruptly opened, and the waiter twice whispered: "Pst! Pst!"

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Fanferlot rapidly disappeared into a dark closet. He had barely time to close the door before Madame Gipsy entered the room. The poor girl was sadly changed. She was pale and hollow-cheeked, and her eyes were red with weeping.

On seeing her, Madame Alexandre could not conceal her surprise. "Why, my child, you are not going out?" said she.

"I am obliged to do so, madame; and I have come to ask you to tell any one that may call during my absence to wait until I return."

"But where in the world are you going at this hour, unwell as you are?"

For a moment Madame Gipsy hesitated. "Oh," she said, "you are so kind that I am tempted to confide in you; read this note which a messenger just now brought to me."

"What!" cried Madame Alexandre perfectly aghast; "a messenger enter my house, and go up to your room!"

"Is there anything surprising in that?"

"No, oh, no! nothing surprising." And in a tone loud enough to be heard in the closet, Madame Alexandre read the note:

"A friend of Prosper's who can neither receive you, nor present himself at your hotel, is very anxious to speak to you. Be in the omnibus office opposite the tower of Saint Jacques to-night at nine precisely, and the writer will be there, and tell you what he has to say.

"I have appointed this public place for the rendezvous so as to relieve your mind of all fear."

"And you are going to this rendezvous?"

"Certainly, madame."

"But it is imprudent, foolish: it is a snare to entrap you."

"It makes no difference," interrupted Nina. "I am so unfortunate already that I have nothing more to dread. Any change would be a relief." And, without waiting to hear any more, she went off. The door had scarcely closed upon her before Fanferlot bounced from the closet.

The mild detective was white with rage, and swore violently. "What is the meaning of this?" he cried. "Am I to stand by and have people walking all over the Grand Archangel as if it were a public street?" Madame Alexandre stood trembling, and dared not speak. "Was ever such impudence heard of before!" he continued. "A messenger comes into my house

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and goes upstairs without being seen by anybody! I will look into this. And the idea of you, Madame Alexandre, you, a sensible woman, being idiotic enough to try and persuade that little viper not to keep the appointment!"

"But, my dear—"

"Had you not sense enough to know that I would follow her, and discover what she is attempting to conceal? Come, make haste and help me, so that she won't recognize me."

In a few minutes Fanferlot was completely disguised by a thick beard, a wig, and a linen blouse, and looked for all the world like one of those disreputable working men who go about seeking for employment, and, at the same time, hoping they may not find any.

"Have you your life-preserver?" asked the solicitous Madame Alexandre.

"Yes, yes; make haste and have that letter to M. de Clameran posted, and keep on the lookout." And without listening to his wife, who called after him, "Good luck," Fanferlot darted into the street.

Madame Gipsy had some minutes' start of him; but he ran up the street he knew she must have taken, and overtook her on the Pont-au-Change. She was walking with the uncertain manner of a person who, impatient to be at a rendezvous, has started too soon, and is obliged to occupy the intervening time. First she would walk slowly, then quicken her steps, and proceed very rapidly. She strolled up and down the Place du Chatelet several times, read the theatre-bills, and finally seated herself on a bench. One minute before a quarter to nine she entered the omnibus office and sat down.

A moment afterward Fanferlot entered; but, as he feared that Madame Gipsy might recognize him in spite of his beard, he took a seat at the opposite end of the room, in a dark corner. "Singular place for a conversation," he thought, as he watched the young woman. "Who in the world can have made this appointment in an omnibus office? Judging from her evident curiosity and uneasiness, I could swear she has not the faintest idea for whom she is waiting."

Meanwhile, the office was rapidly filling with people. Every minute an official would shout out the destination of an omnibus which had just arrived, and the passengers would rush in to obtain tickets, hoping to be able to proceed by it.

As each newcomer entered, Nina would tremble, and Fan-

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ferlot would say, "This must be him!" Finally, as the Hotel de Ville clock was striking nine, a man entered, and, without going to the ticket-desk, walked directly up to Nina, bowed, and took a seat beside her. He was of medium size, rather stout, with a crimson face, and fiery-red whiskers. His dress was that of a well-to-do merchant, and there was nothing in his manner or appearance to excite attention.

Fanferlot watched him eagerly. "Well, my friend," he said to himself, "in future I shall recognize you, no matter where we meet; and this very evening I will find out who you are." Despite his intent listening, Fanferlot could not hear a word spoken by either the stranger or Nina. All he could do was to judge what the subject of their conversation might be by their gestures.

When the stout man bowed and spoke to her, Madame Gipsy looked so surprised that it was evident she had never seen him before. When he sat down by her, and said a few words, she started up with a frightened air, as if seeking to escape. A single word and look made her resume her seat. Then, as the stout man went on talking, Nina's attitude betrayed a certain apprehension. She evidently refused to do something required of her; then suddenly she seemed to consent, when a good reason was given for her doing so. At one moment she appeared ready to weep, and the next her pretty face was illumined by a bright smile. Finally she shook hands with her companion, as if she were confirming a promise.

"What can all this mean?" said Fanferlot to himself, as he sat in his dark corner, biting his nails. "What an idiot I am to have stationed myself so far off!" He was thinking how he could manage to approach nearer without arousing their suspicions, when the stout man rose, offered his arm to Madame Gipsy, who accepted it without hesitation, and they walked together toward the door.

They were so engrossed with each other, that Fanferlot thought he could, without risk, follow them closely; and it was well he did, for the crowd was dense outside, and he would soon have lost sight of them. Reaching the door, he saw the stout man and Nina cross the pavement, hail a cab, and enter it.

"Very good," muttered Fanferlot, "I've got them now. There is no need to hurry."

While the driver was gathering up his reins, Fanferlot pre-

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pared himself; and, when the cab started, he set off at a brisk trot, determined upon following it to the end of the earth.

The cab proceeded along the Boulevard Sebastopol. It went pretty fast; but it was not for nothing that Fanferlot had been dubbed the Squirrel. With his elbows glued to his sides, and economizing his wind, he ran on. By the time he had reached the Boulevard St. Denis, he began to get winded, and stiff from the pain in his side. The cabman abruptly turned into the Rue Faubourg St. Martin.

But Fanferlot, who, at eight years of age, had played about the streets of Paris, was not to be baffled; he was a man of resources. He seized hold of the springs of the cab, raised himself up by the strength of his wrists, and hung on, with his legs resting on the axletree of the hind wheels. He was not particularly comfortable, but then he no longer ran the risk of being distanced. "Now," he chuckled, behind his false beard, "you may drive as fast as you please, cabby."

The man whipped up his horses, and drove furiously along the hilly street of the Faubourg St. Martin. Finally the cab stopped in front of a wine-shop, and the driver jumped down from his seat, and went in.

The detective also left his uncomfortable post, and crouching in a doorway waited for Nina and her companion to alight, with the intention of following closely upon their heels. Five minutes passed, and still there were no signs of them. "What can they be doing all this time?" grumbled the detective. With great precautions he approached the cab and peeped in. Oh, cruel deception! it was empty!

Fanferlot felt as if some one had thrown a bucket of ice-water over him; he remained rooted to the spot with his mouth open, the picture of blank bewilderment. He soon recovered his wits sufficiently to burst forth into a volley of oaths, loud enough to rattle all the window-panes in the neighborhood. "Tricked!" he cried, "fooled! Ah! but won't I make them pay for this!"

In a moment his quick mind had run over the gamut of possibilities, probable and improbable. "Evidently," he muttered, "this fellow and Nina entered by one door and got out by the other; the trick is simple enough. If they resorted to it, 'tis because they feared being followed. If they feared being followed, they have uneasy consciences, therefore—" He suddenly interrupted his monologue as the idea struck him that he had better endeavor to find out something from the driver.

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Unfortunately, the driver was in a very surly mood, and not only refused to answer, but shook his whip in so threatening a manner that Fanferlot deemed it prudent to beat a retreat. "Oh, hang it!" he muttered, "perhaps the driver is mixed up in the affair also!"

But what could he do now at this time of night? He could not imagine. He walked dejectedly back to the quay, and it was half-past eleven when he reached his own door. "Has the little fool returned?" he inquired of Madame Alexandre the instant she let him in.

"No; but here are two large bundles which have come for her."

Fanferlot hastily opened them. They contained three cotton dresses, some heavy shoes, and some linen caps. "Well," said the detective in a vexed tone, "now she is going to disguise herself. Upon my word, I am getting puzzled! What can she be up to?"

When Fanferlot was sulkily walking down the Faubourg St. Martin he had fully made up his mind that he would not tell his wife of his discomfiture. But once at home, confronted with a new fact of a nature to negative all his conjectures, his vanity disappeared. He confessed everything—his hopes so nearly realized, his strange mischance, and his suspicions. They talked the matter over and finally decided that they would not go to bed until Madame Gipsy, from whom Madame Alexandre was determined to obtain an explanation of what had happened, returned. At one o'clock the worthy couple were about giving over all hope of her reappearance when they heard the bell ring.

Fanferlot instantly slipped into the closet, and Madame Alexandre remained in the office to receive Nina. "Here you are at last, my dear child!" she cried. "Oh, I have been so uneasy, so afraid lest some misfortune had happened!"

"Thanks for your kind interest, madame. Has a bundle been sent here for me?"

Poor Nina's appearance had strikingly changed; she was still sad, but no longer dejected as she had been. To her prostration of the last few days had succeeded a firm and generous resolution, which was betrayed in her sparkling eyes and resolute step.

"Yes, two bundles came for you; here they are. I suppose you saw M. Bertomy's friend?"

"Yes, madame, and his advice has so changed my plans that, I regret to say, I must leave you to-morrow."

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"Going away to-morrow! then something must have happened."

"Oh! nothing that would interest you, madame."

After lighting her candle at the gas-burner, Madame Gipsy said "Good night" in a very significant way, and left the room.

"And what do you think of that, Madame Alexandre?" asked Fanferlot, as he emerged from his hiding-place.

"It is incredible! This girl writes to M. de Lagors to meet her here, and then does not wait for him."

"She evidently mistrusts us; she knows who I am."

"Then this friend of the cashier must have told her."

"Nobody knows who told her. I begin to think that I have to do with some very knowing thieves. They guess I am on their track, and are trying to escape me. I should not be at all surprised if this little rogue has the money herself, and intends to run off with it to-morrow."

"That is not my opinion; but listen to me, you had better take my advice, and consult M. Lecoq."

Fanferlot meditated awhile, then exclaimed: "Very well; I will see him, just for your satisfaction; because I know that if I have not discovered anything, neither will he. But if he takes upon himself to be domineering, it won't do; for only let him show his insolence to me, and *I* will let him know his place!"

Notwithstanding this brave speech, the detective passed an uneasy night, and at six o'clock the next morning he was up—it was necessary to rise very early if one wished to catch M. Lecoq at home—and, refreshed by a cup of strong coffee, he directed his steps toward the dwelling of the famous detective.

Fanferlot the Squirrel was certainly not afraid of his chief, as he called him, for he started off with his nose in the air and his hat cocked on one side. But by the time he reached the Rue Montmartre, where M. Lecoq lived, his courage had vanished; he pulled his hat over his eyes, and hung his head, as if looking for relief among the paving-stones. He slowly ascended the stairs, pausing several times, and looking around as if he would like to fly. Finally he reached the third floor, and stood before a door decorated with the arms of the famous detective—a cock, the symbol of vigilance—and his heart failed him so that he had scarcely the courage to ring the bell.

The door was opened by Janouille, M. Lecoq's old servant, who had very much the manner and appearance of a grenadier.

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She was as faithful to her master as a watchdog, and always stood ready to attack any one who did not treat him with the august respect which she considered his due. "Well, M. Fanferlot," she said, "you come at a right time for once in your life. The chief is waiting to see you."

Upon this announcement Fanferlot was seized with a violent desire to retreat. By what chance could Lecoq be waiting for him? While he thus hesitated, Janouille seized him by the arm and pulled him in, saying: "Do you want to take root there? Come along, the master is busy at work in his study."

Seated at a desk in the middle of a large room, half library and half theatrical dressing-room, furnished in a curious style, was the same individual with gold spectacles who had said to Prosper at the Prefecture, "Have courage." This was M. Lecoq in his official character.

Fanferlot on his entrance advanced respectfully, bowing till his backbone was a perfect curve. M. Lecoq laid down his pen, and, looking sharply at him, said: "Ah, so here you are, young man. Well, it seems that you haven't made much progress in Bertomy's case."

"What," murmured Fanferlot, "you know—"

"I know that you have muddled everything until you can't see your way out; so that you are ready to give in."

"But, M. Lecoq, it was not I—"

M. Lecoq rose, and walked up and down the room; suddenly he confronted Fanferlot, and said in a tone of scornful irony: "What would you think, Master Squirrel, of a man who abuses the confidence of those who employ him, who reveals just enough to lead the prosecution on the wrong scent, who sacrifices to his own foolish vanity the cause of justice and the liberty of an unfortunate prisoner?"

Fanferlot started back with a scared look. "I should say," he stammered, "I should say—"

"You would say this man ought to be punished, and dismissed from his employment; and you are right. The less a profession is honored, the more honorable should those be who belong to it. And yet you have been false to yours. Ah! Master Squirrel, we are ambitious, and we try to make the police service forward our own views! We let justice go astray, and we go on a different tack. One must be a more cunning bloodhound than you are, my friend, to be able to hunt without a huntsman. You are too self-reliant by half."

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"But, my chief, I swear—"

"Silence! Do you pretend to say that you did your duty, and told all you knew to the investigating magistrate? While others were giving information against the cashier, you were getting up evidence against the banker. You watch his movements: you become intimate with his valet."

Was M. Lecoq really angry, or pretending to be so? Fanferlot, who knew him well, was puzzled as to whether all this indignation was real.

"Still, if you were only skilful," continued M. Lecoq, "it would be another matter; but no: you wish to be master, and you are not even fit to be a journeyman."

"You are right, my chief," said Fanferlot piteously, for he saw that it was useless for him to deny anything. "But how could I go about an affair like this, where there was not even a trace, a sign of any kind to start from?"

M. Lecoq shrugged his shoulders. "You are an ass!" exclaimed he. "Why, don't you know that on the very day you were sent for with the commissary to verify the fact of the robbery, you held—I do not say certainly, but very probably held—in your great stupid hands the means of knowing which key had been used when the money was stolen?"

"How is that?"

"You want to know, do you? I will tell you. Do you remember the scratch you discovered on the safe? You were so struck by it that you could not refrain from calling out directly you saw it. You carefully examined it, and were convinced that it was a fresh scratch, only a few hours old. You thought, and rightly too, that this scratch was made at the time of the theft. Now, with what was it made? Evidently with a key. That being the case, you should have asked for the keys both of the banker and the cashier. One of them would have probably had some particles of the hard green paint sticking to it."

Fanferlot listened with open mouth to this explanation. At the last words, he violently slapped his forehead with his hand and cried out: "Idiot! idiot!"

"You have correctly named yourself," said M. Lecoq. "Idiot! This proof stares you right in the face, and you don't see it! This scratch is the only clue there is to follow, and you must like a fool neglect it. If I find the guilty party, it will be by means of this scratch; and I am determined that I will find him."

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At a distance the Squirrel very bravely abuses and defies M. Lecoq, but in his presence he yields to the influence which this extraordinary man exercises upon all who approach him. This exact information, these minute details just given him, so upset his mind that he could not imagine where and how M. Lecoq had obtained them. Finally he humbly said: "You have then been occupying yourself with this case, my chief?"

"Probably I have; but I am not infallible, and may have overlooked some important evidence. Take a seat, and tell me all you know."

M. Lecoq was not the man to be hoodwinked, so Fanferlot told the exact truth, a rare thing for him to do. However, as he reached the end of his statement, a feeling of mortified vanity prevented his telling how he had been fooled by Nina and the stout man. Unfortunately for poor Fanferlot, M. Lecoq was always fully informed on every subject in which he interested himself. "It seems to me, Master Squirrel," said he, "that you have forgotten something. How far did you follow the empty cab?"

Fanferlot blushed, and hung his head like a guilty schoolboy. "Oh, my chief!" he cried, "and you know all about that too! How could you have—" But a sudden idea flashed across his mind, he stopped short, bounded off his chair, and exclaimed: "Oh! I know now: you were the stout gentleman with the red whiskers."

His amazement gave so singular an expression to his face that M. Lecoq could not restrain a smile. "Then it was you!" continued the bewildered detective; "you were the stout gentleman at whom I stared, so as to impress his appearance upon my mind, and I never recognized you! You would make a superb actor, my chief, if you would go on the stage; but I was disguised too—very well disguised."

"Very poorly disguised: it is only just to you that I should let you know what a failure it was, Fanferlot. Do you think that a huge beard and a blouse are a sufficient transformation? The eye is the thing to be changed—the eye! The art lies in being able to change the eye. That is the secret." This theory of disguise explained why the lynx-eyed Lecoq never appeared at the Prefecture of Police without his gold spectacles.

"Then, my chief," said Fanferlot, clinging to his idea, "you have been more successful than Madame Alexandre; you have made the little girl confess? You know why she leaves the

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Grand Archangel, why she does not wait for M. de Lagors, and why she has bought herself some cotton dresses?"

"She is following my advice."

"That being the case," said the detective dejectedly, "there is nothing left for me to do but to acknowledge myself an ass."

"No, Squirrel," said M. Lecoq, kindly. "You are not an ass. You merely did wrong in undertaking a task beyond your capacity. Have you progressed one step since you started in this affair? No. That shows that, although you are incomparable as a lieutenant, you do not possess the qualities of a general. I am going to present you with an aphorism; remember it, and let it be your guide in the future: *A man can shine in the second rank who would be totally eclipsed in the first.*"

Never had Fanferlot seen his chief so talkative and good-natured. Finding his deceit discovered, he had expected to be overwhelmed with a storm of anger; whereas he had escaped with a little shower that had cooled his brain. Lecoq's anger disappeared like one of those heavy clouds which threaten in the horizon for a moment, and then are suddenly swept away by a gust of wind.

But this unexpected affability made Fanferlot feel uneasy. He was afraid that something might be concealed beneath it. "Do you know who the thief is, my chief?" he inquired.

"I know no more than you do, Fanferlot; and you seem to have made up your mind, whereas I am still undecided. You declare the cashier to be innocent, and the banker guilty. I don't know whether you are right or wrong. I follow after you, and have got no further than the preliminaries of my investigation. I am certain of but one thing, and that is, the scratch on the safe-door. That scratch is my starting-point."

As he spoke, M. Lecoq took from his desk an immense sheet of paper which he unrolled. On this paper was photographed the door of M. Fauvel's safe. Every detail was rendered perfectly. There were the five movable buttons with the engraved letters, and the narrow, projecting brass lock. The scratch was indicated with great exactness.

"Now," said M. Lecoq, "here is our scratch. It runs from top to bottom, starting diagonally, from the keyhole, and proceeding from left to right; that is to say, it terminates on the side next to the private staircase leading to the banker's apartments. Although very deep at the keyhole, it ends in a scarcely perceptible mark."

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"Yes, my chief, I see all that."

"Naturally you thought that this scratch was made by the person who took the money. Let us see if you were right. I have here a little iron box, painted green like M. Fauvel's safe; here it is. Take a key, and try to scratch it."

"The deuce take it!" said Fanferlot after several attempts, "this paint is awfully hard to move!"

"Very hard, my friend, and yet that on the safe is harder still, and more solid. So you see the scratch you discovered could not have been made by the trembling hand of a thief letting the key slip."

"Sapristi!" exclaimed Fanferlot amazed; "I never should have thought of that. It certainly required great force to make the deep scratch on the safe."

"Yes, but how was that force applied? I have been racking my brain for three days, and it was only yesterday that I came to a conclusion. Let us examine if my conjectures present enough chances of probability to establish a starting-point."

M. Lecoq put the photograph aside, and, walking to the door communicating with his bedroom, took the key from the lock, and, holding it in his hands, said: "Come here, Fanferlot, and stand by my side, there; very well. Now suppose that I want to open this door, and that you don't wish me to open it; when you see me about to insert the key, what would be your first impulse?"

"To put my hands on your arm, and draw it toward me so as to prevent your introducing the key."

"Precisely so. Now let us try it; go on." Fanferlot obeyed; and the key held by M. Lecoq, pulled aside from the lock, slipped along the door, and traced upon it, from above to below a diagonal scratch, the exact reproduction of the one in the photograph.

"Oh, oh, oh!" exclaimed Fanferlot in three different tones of admiration, as he stood gazing in a reverie at the door.

"Do you begin to understand?" asked M. Lecoq.

"Understand, my chief? Why, a child could understand it now. Ah, what a man you are! I see the scene as if I had been there. Two persons were present at the robbery; one wished to take the money, the other wished to prevent its being taken. That is clear, that is certain."

Accustomed to triumphs of this sort, M. Lecoq was much amused at Fanferlot's enthusiasm. "There you go off, half-

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primed again," he said good-humoredly; "you regard as certain proof a circumstance which may be accidental, and at the most only probable."

"No, my chief; no! a man like you could not be mistaken; doubt is no longer possible."

"That being the case, what deductions would you draw from our discovery?"

"In the first place, it proves that I am correct in thinking the cashier innocent."

"How so?"

"Because, being at perfect liberty to open the safe whenever he wished to do so, it is not likely that he would have had a witness present when he intended to commit the theft."

"Well reasoned, Fanferlot. But on this supposition the banker would be equally innocent; reflect a little."

Fanferlot reflected, and all his confidence vanished. "You are right," he said in a despairing tone. "What can be done now?"

"Look for the third rogue, or rather the real rogue, the one who opened the safe and stole the notes, and who is still at large, while others are suspected."

"Impossible, my chief, impossible! Don't you know that M. Fauvel and his cashier had keys, and they only? And they always kept these keys in their possession."

"On the evening of the robbery the banker left his key in his escritoire."

"Yes; but the key alone was not sufficient to open the safe; it was necessary that the word also should be known."

M. Lecoq shrugged his shoulders impatiently. "What was the word?" he asked.

"Gipsy."

"Which is the name of the cashier's mistress. Now keep your eyes open. The day you find a man sufficiently intimate with Prosper to be aware of all the circumstances connected with this name, and who is at the same time on such a footing with the Fauvel family as would give him the privilege of entering M. Fauvel's chamber, then, and not until then, will you discover the guilty party. On that day the problem will be solved."

Self-sufficient and vain, like all famous men, M. Lecoq had never had a pupil, and never wished to have one. He worked alone, because he hated assistants, wishing to share neither the

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pleasures of success nor the pain of defeat. Thus Fanferlot, who knew his chief's character, was astonished to hear him giving advice who heretofore had only given orders. He was so puzzled that, in spite of his preoccupation, he could not help betraying his surprise. "My chief," he ventured to say, "you seem to take a great interest in this affair, you have so deeply studied it."

M. Lecoq started nervously, and replied, frowning: "You are too curious, Master Squirrel; be careful that you do not go too far. Do you understand?"

Fanferlot began to apologize.

"That will do," interrupted M. Lecoq. "If I choose to lend you a helping hand, it is because it suits my fancy to do so. It pleases me to be the head, and to let you be the hand. Unassisted, with your preconceived ideas, you never would have found the culprit; if we two together don't find him, my name is not Lecoq."

"We shall certainly succeed, as you interest yourself in the case."

"Yes, I am interested in it, and during the last four days I have discovered many important facts. But listen to me. I have reasons for not appearing in this affair. No matter what happens, I forbid you mentioning my name. If we succeed, all the success must be attributed to you. And, above all, don't try to find out what I choose to keep from you. Be satisfied with what explanations I give you. Now, be careful."

These conditions seemed to suit Fanferlot perfectly. "I will obey your instructions and be discreet," he replied.

"I shall rely upon you," continued M. Lecoq. "Now, to begin, you must carry this photograph to the investigating magistrate. I know M. Patrigent is much perplexed about the case. Explain to him as if it were your own discovery what I have just shown you; repeat for his benefit the experiment we have performed, and I am convinced that this evidence will determine him to release the cashier. Prosper must be at liberty before I can commence my operations."

"Of course, my chief; but must I let him know that I suspect any one besides the banker or cashier?"

"Certainly. The authorities must not be kept in ignorance of your intention of following up this affair. M. Patrigent will tell you to watch Prosper; you will reply that you will not lose sight of him. I myself will answer for his being in safe keeping."

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"Suppose he asks me about Nina Gipsy?"

M. Lecoq hesitated for a moment. "Tell him," he finally said, "that you persuaded her, in the interest of Prosper, to live in a house where she can watch some one whom you suspect."

Fanferlot rolled up the photograph and joyously seized hold of his hat, intending to depart, when M. Lecoq checked him by waving his hand, and said: "I have not finished yet. Do you know how to drive a carriage and manage horses?"

"How can you ask such a question as this, my chief, of a man who used to be a rider in the Bouthor Circus?"

"Very good. As soon as the magistrate dismisses you, return home immediately, obtain for yourself a wig and the complete dress of a valet; and, when you are ready, take this letter to the agency for servants at the corner of the Passage Delorme."

"But, my chief—"

"There must be no but, my friend; the agent will send you to M. de Clameran, who is wanting a valet, his man having left him yesterday."

"Excuse me, if I venture to suggest that I think you are laboring under a wrong impression. This De Clameran is not the cashier's friend."

"Why do you always interrupt me?" said M. Lecoq imperiously. "Do what I tell you, and don't disturb your mind about the rest. I know that De Clameran is not a friend of Prosper's; but he is the friend and protector of Raoul de Lagors. Why so? Whence the intimacy of these two men of such different ages? That is what I must find out. I must also find out who this ironmaster is who spends all his time in Paris, and never goes to look after his forges. An individual who takes it into his head to live at the Hotel du Louvre, in the midst of a constantly changing crowd, is a fellow difficult to watch. Through you I will keep an eye upon him. He has a carriage, which you will have to drive; you will soon be able to give me an account of his manner of life, and of the sort of people with whom he associates."

"You shall be obeyed, my chief."

"Another thing. M. de Clameran is irritable and suspicious. You will be presented to him under the name of Joseph Dubois. He will ask for certificates of your good character. Here are three, which state that you have lived with the Marquis de Sairmeuse and the Count de Commarin, and that you have just

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left the Baron de Wortschen, who went to Germany the other day. Now keep your eyes open; be careful of your get-up and manners. Be polite, but not excessively so. And, above all things, don't be too honest: it might arouse suspicion."

"I understand, my chief. Where shall I report to you?"

"I will see you daily. Until I tell you differently, don't put foot in this house; you might be followed. If anything important should happen, send a telegram to your wife, and she will inform me. Go, and be prudent."

The door closed on Fanferlot as M. Lecoq passed into his bedroom. In the twinkling of an eye the latter divested himself of the appearance of chief detective. He took off his stiff cravat and gold spectacles and removed the close wig from his thick black hair. The official Lecoq had disappeared, leaving in his place the genuine Lecoq whom nobody knew—a good-looking young man, with a bold, determined manner, and brilliant, piercing eyes. But he only remained himself for an instant. Seated before a dressing-table covered with more cosmetics, paints, perfumes, false hair, and other shams than are to be found on the toilet-tables of our modern belles, he began to undo the work of nature and to make himself a new face. He worked slowly, handling his brushes with great care. But in an hour he had accomplished one of his daily masterpieces. When he had finished, he was no longer Lecoq: he was the stout gentleman with red whiskers whom Fanferlot had failed to recognize.

"Well," he said, casting a last look in the mirror, "I have forgotten nothing: I have left nothing to chance. All my plans are fixed; and I shall make some progress to-day, provided the Squirrel does not waste time."

But Fanferlot was too happy to waste even a minute. He did not run, he flew, toward the Palais de Justice. At last he was able to convince some one that he, Fanferlot, was a man of wonderful perspicacity. As to acknowledging that he was about to obtain a triumph with the ideas of another man, he never thought of such a thing. It is generally in perfect good faith that the jackdaw struts about in the peacock's feathers.

Fanferlot's hopes were not deceived. If the magistrate was not absolutely convinced, he admired the ingenuity and shrewdness of the whole proceeding. "This decides me," he said, as he dismissed Fanferlot. "I will draw up a favorable report to-day; and it is highly probable that the accused will be

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released to-morrow." He began at once to write out one of those terrible decisions of "Not proven," which restores liberty, but not honor, to the accused man; which says that he is not guilty, but does not say that he is innocent.

"Whereas sufficient proofs are wanting against the accused, Prosper Bertomy, in pursuance of Article 128 of the Criminal Code, we hereby declare that no grounds at present exist for prosecuting the aforesaid prisoner; and we order that he be released from the prison where he is confined, and set at liberty by the jailer," etc.

"Well," said he to the clerk, "here we have another of those crimes which justice can not clear up. The mystery remains to be solved. There is another file to be stowed away among the police records." And with his own hand he wrote on the cover of the bundle of papers relating to Prosper's case its number of rotation: *File Number 113*.

VII

PROSPER had been languishing in his cell for nine days, when one Thursday morning the jailer came to apprise him of the magistrate's decision. He was conducted before the officer who had searched him when he was arrested: and his watch, penknife, and several small articles of jewelry were restored to him; then he was told to sign a large sheet of paper, which he did.

He was next led across a dark passage, and almost pushed through a door, which was abruptly shut upon him. He found himself on the quay: he was alone; he was free.

Free! Justice had confessed her inability to convict him of the crime of which he was accused. Free! He could walk about, he could breathe the fresh air; but every door would be closed against him. Only acquittal after due trial would restore him to his former position among men. A decision of "Not proven" had left him exposed to continual suspicion.

The torments inflicted by public opinion are more fearful than those endured in a prison cell. At the moment of his restora-

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tion to liberty, Prosper suffered so cruelly from the horror of his situation that he could not repress a cry of rage and despair. "I am innocent! God knows I am innocent!" he cried out. But of what use was his anger? Two strangers, who were passing, stopped to look at him, and said pityingly: "The poor fellow is crazy."

The Seine was at his feet. A thought of suicide crossed his mind. "No," he said, "no! I have not even the right to kill myself. No: I will not die until I have proved my innocence!"

Often, day and night, had Prosper repeated these words, as he walked his cell. With a heart filled with a bitter, determined thirst for vengeance, which gives a man the force and patience to destroy or wear out all obstacles in his way, he would say: "Oh! why am I not at liberty? I am helpless, caged up; but let me once be free!" Now he was free; and for the first time he saw the difficulties of the task before him. For each crime, justice requires a criminal; he could not establish his own innocence without producing the guilty individual; how was he to find the thief and hand him over to the law?

Despondent, but not discouraged, Prosper turned in the direction of his apartments. He was beset by a thousand anxieties. What had taken place during the nine days that he had been cut off from all intercourse with his friends? No news of them had reached him. He had heard no more of what was going on in the outside world than if his secret cell had been a tomb. He walked slowly along the streets, with his eyes cast down, dreading to meet some familiar face. He, who had always been so haughty, would now be pointed at with the finger of scorn. He would be greeted with cold looks and averted faces. Men would refuse to shake hands with him. Still, if he could count on only one true friend! Yes, only one. But what friend would believe him when his father, who should have been the last to suspect him, had refused to believe him?

In the midst of his sufferings, when he felt almost overwhelmed by the sense of his wretched, lonely condition, Prosper thought of Nina Gipsy. He had never loved the poor girl: indeed, at times he almost hated her; but now he felt a longing to see her, because he knew that she loved him, and that nothing would make her think him guilty; because, too, woman remains true and firm in her belief, and is always faithful in the hour of adversity, although she sometimes fails in prosperity.

On reaching his house in the Rue Chaptal, Prosper hesitated

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at the moment he was about to cross the threshold. He suffered from the timidity which an honest man always feels when he knows he is regarded with suspicion. He dreaded meeting any one whom he knew; still he could not remain in the street, so he entered. When the concierge saw him, he uttered an exclamation of glad surprise, and said: "Ah, here you are at last, sir. I told every one you would come out as white as snow; and, when I read in the papers that you were arrested for robbery, I said: 'My third-floor lodger a thief! Never would I believe such a thing, never!'"

The congratulations of this ignorant man were sincere, and came from pure kindness of heart; but they impressed Prosper painfully and he cut them short by abruptly exclaiming: "Madame, of course, has left; can you tell me where she has gone?"

"Dear me, no, I can not. The day of your arrest, she sent for a cab and left with her trunks, and no one has seen or heard of her since."

This was another blow to the unhappy cashier. "And where are my servants?"

"Gone, sir. Your father paid them their wages and discharged them."

"I suppose, then, you have my key?"

"No, sir; when your father left here this morning at eight o'clock, he told me that a friend of his would take charge of your rooms until you returned. Of course you know who he is—a stout gentleman with red whiskers."

Prosper was astounded. What could be the meaning of one of his father's friends occupying his rooms? He did not, however, betray his surprise, but quietly said: "Yes, I know who it is."

He quickly ran up the stairs, and knocked at his door, which was at once opened by his father's friend. He had been accurately described by the concierge. A stout man, with a red face, full lips, sharp eyes, and of rather coarse manners, stood bowing to Prosper, who had never seen him before. "Delighted to make your acquaintance, sir," said he.

He seemed to be perfectly at home. On the table lay a book, which he had taken from the bookcase; and he appeared ready to do the honors of the place.

"I must say, sir," began Prosper.

"That you are surprised to find me here? So I suppose. Your father intended introducing me to you; but he was com-

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pelled to return to Beaucaire this morning; and let me add that he departed thoroughly convinced, as I myself am, that you never took a sou from M. Fauvel."

At this unexpected good news, Prosper's face lit up with pleasure.

"Here is a letter from your father, which I hope will serve as an introduction between us."

Prosper opened the letter; and as he read his eyes grew brighter, and a slight color returned to his pale face. When he had finished he held out his hand to the stout gentleman, and said: "My father tells me, sir, that you are his best friend; he advises me to have absolute confidence in you, and to follow your advice."

"Exactly. This morning your father said to me: 'Verduret' —that is my name—'Verduret, my son is in great trouble, and must be helped out of it.' I replied: 'I am both ready and willing,' and here I am to assist you. Now the ice is broken, is it not? Then let us go to work at once. What do you intend doing?"

This question revived Prosper's slumbering rage. His eyes flashed. "What do I intend doing?" said he angrily. "What should I do but seek the villain who has ruined me?"

"So I supposed; but have you any means of success?"

"None; yet I shall succeed, because, when a man devotes his whole life to the accomplishment of an object, he is certain to achieve it."

"Well said, M. Prosper; and, to be frank, I fully expected that this would be your purpose. I have therefore already begun to think and act for you. I have a plan. In the first place, you will sell this furniture, and disappear from the neighborhood."

"Disappear!" cried Prosper indignantly; "disappear! Why, sir! do you not see that such a step would be a confession of guilt, would authorize the world to say that I am hiding so as to enjoy undisturbed the stolen three hundred and fifty thousand francs?"

"Well, what then?" said the man with the red whiskers; "did you not say just now that the sacrifice of your life is made? The expert swimmer thrown into the river, after being robbed, is careful not to rise to the surface immediately: on the contrary, he plunges beneath, and remains there as long as his breath holds out. He comes up again at a great distance off,

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and lands out of sight; then, when he is supposed to be dead, he suddenly reappears and has his revenge. You have an enemy? Some petty imprudence will betray him. But, while he sees you standing by on the watch, he will be on his guard."

It was with a sort of amazed submission that Prosper listened to this man, who, though a friend of his father, was an utter stranger to himself. He submitted unconsciously to the ascendency of a nature so much more energetic and forcible than his own. In his helpless condition he was grateful for friendly assistance, and said: "I will follow your advice, sir."

"I was sure you would, my dear fellow. Let us reflect upon the course you ought to pursue. And remember that you will need every franc of the proceeds of the sale. Have you any ready money? no, but you must have some. Knowing that you would need this at once, I have already spoken to an upholsterer; and he will give you twelve thousand francs for everything minus the pictures."

The cashier could not refrain from shrugging his shoulders, which M. Verduret observed. "Well," said he, "it is rather hard, I admit, but it is a necessity. Now listen: you are the invalid, and I am the doctor charged to cure you; if I cut to the quick, you will have to endure it. It is the only way to save you."

"Cut away then," answered Prosper.

"Well, we will make haste, for time presses. You have a friend, M. de Lagors?"

"Raoul? Yes, he is an intimate friend of mine."

"Now tell me, who is this fellow?"

The term "fellow" seemed to offend Prosper. "M. de Lagors," he said haughtily, "is M. Fauvel's nephew; he is a wealthy young man, handsome, intelligent, cultivated, and the best friend I have."

"Hum!" said M. Verduret, "I shall be delighted to make the acquaintance of one adorned by so many charming qualities. I must let you know that I wrote him a note in your name asking him to come here, and he sent word that he would come."

"What! do you suppose—"

"Oh, I suppose nothing! Only I must see this young man. Also I have arranged and will submit to you a little plan of conversation—" A ring at the outer door interrupted M. Verduret. "The deuce!" exclaimed he; "adieu to my plan; here he is! Where can I hide so as to both hear and see?"

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"There, in my bedroom; leave the door open and the curtain down."

A second ring was heard. "Now remember, Prosper," said M. Verduret in a warning tone, "not one word to this man about your plans, or about me. Pretend to be discouraged, helpless, and undecided what to do." And he disappeared behind the curtain as Prosper ran to open the door.

Prosper's portrait of M. de Lagors was no exaggerated one. Such an open and handsome countenance and manly figure could belong only to a noble character. Although Raoul said that he was twenty-four, he appeared to be not more than twenty. He had a fine figure, well knit and supple; an abundance of light chestnut-colored hair, curled over his intelligent-looking forehead, and his large blue eyes, which beamed with candor. His first impulse was to throw himself into Prosper's arms. "My poor, dear friend!" he said, "my poor Prosper!"

But beneath these affectionate demonstrations there was a certain constraint, which, if it escaped the perception of the cashier, was noticed by M. Verduret. "Your letter, my dear Prosper," said Raoul, "made me almost ill, I was so frightened by it. I asked myself if you could have lost your mind. Then I put aside everything, to hasten to your assistance; and here I am."

Prosper did not seem to hear him; his thoughts were occupied with the letter which he had not written. What were its contents? Who was this stranger whose assistance he had accepted?

"You must not feel discouraged," continued M. de Lagors; "you are young enough to commence life anew. Your friends are still left to you. I have come to say to you: 'Rely upon me; I am rich, half of my fortune is at your disposal."

This generous offer, made at a moment like this with such frank simplicity, deeply touched Prosper. "Thanks, Raoul," he said with emotion, "thank you! But unfortunately all the money in the world would be of no use now."

"Why so? What, then, are you going to do? Do you propose to remain in Paris?"

"I know not, Raoul. I have formed no plans yet. My mind is too confused for me to think."

"I will tell you what to do," resumed Raoul quickly; "you must start afresh; until this mysterious robbery is explained you must keep away from Paris. Excuse my frankness, but it will never do for you to remain here."

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"And suppose it never should be explained?"

"Only the more reason for your remaining in oblivion. I have been talking about you to De Clameran. 'If I were in Prosper's place,' he said, 'I would turn everything into money, and embark for America; there I would make a fortune, and return to crush with my millions those who have suspected me."

This advice offended Prosper's pride, but he interposed no kind of objection. He was recalling to mind what his unknown visitor had said to him. "I will think it over," he finally observed. "I will see. I should like to know what M. Fauvel says."

"My uncle? I suppose you know that I have declined the offer he made me to enter his banking-house, and we have almost quarreled. I have not set foot in his house for over a month; but I hear of him occasionally."

"Through whom?"

"Through your friend Cavaillon. My uncle, they say, is more distressed by this affair than you are. He does not attend to his business, and seems as though he had just recovered from some serious illness."

"And Madame Fauvel, and—" Prosper hesitated—"and Mademoiselle Madeleine, how are they?"

"Oh," said Raoul lightly, "my aunt is as pious as ever; she has mass said for the benefit of the sinner. As to my handsome, icy cousin, she can not bring herself down to common matters, because she is entirely absorbed in preparing for the fancy ball to be given the day after to-morrow by MM. Jandidier. She has discovered, so one of her friends told me, a wonderful dressmaker, a stranger who has suddenly appeared from no one knows where, and who is making for her a costume of one of Catherine de Medicis's maids of honor. I hear it is to be a marvel of beauty."

Excessive suffering brings with it a kind of dull insensibility and stupor; but this last remark of M. de Lagors's touched Prosper to the quick, and he murmured faintly: "Madeleine! Oh, Madeleine!"

M. de Lagors, pretending not to have heard him, rose from his chair, and said: "I must leave you now, my dear Prosper; on Saturday I shall see these ladies at the ball, and bring you news of them. Now, take courage, and remember that, whatever happens, you have a friend in me."

Raoul shook Prosper by the hand and departed, leaving the

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latter standing immovable and overcome by disappointment. He was aroused from his gloomy reverie by hearing the red-whiskered man say in a bantering tone: "So that is one of your friends?"

"Yes," said Prosper with bitterness. "Yet you heard him offer me half of his fortune?"

M. Verduret shrugged his shoulders with an air of compassion. "That was very stingy on his part," said he; "why did he not offer the whole? Offers cost nothing; although I have no doubt that this sweet youth would cheerfully give ten thousand francs to put the ocean between you and him."

"What reason, sir, would he have for doing this?"

"Who knows? Perhaps for the same reason that he told you he had not set foot in his uncle's house for a month."

"But that is the truth, I am sure of it."

"Naturally," said M. Verduret with a provoking smile. "But," continued he with a serious air, "we have devoted enough time to this Adonis, whose measure I have taken. Now, be good enough to change your dress, and we will go and call on M. Fauvel."

This proposal aroused Prosper's anger. "Never!" he exclaimed excitedly; "no, never will I voluntarily set eyes on that wretch!"

This resistance did not surprise M. Verduret. "I can understand your feelings toward him," said he; "but at the same time I hope you will change your mind. For the same reason that I wished to see M. de Lagors I desire to see M. Fauvel; it is necessary, you understand. Are you so very weak that you can not constrain yourself for five minutes? I shall introduce myself as one of your relatives, and you need not open your lips."

"If it is positively necessary," said Prosper, "if—"

"It is necessary; so come on. You must have confidence, and put on a brave face. Hurry and make yourself trim; it is getting late, and I am hungry. We will lunch on our way there."

Prosper had hardly passed into his bedroom when the bell rang again. M. Verduret opened the door. It was the concierge, who handed him a bulky letter, and said: "This letter was left this morning for M. Bertomy; I was so flustered when he came that I forgot to hand it to him. It is a very odd-looking letter; is it not, sir?"

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It was indeed a most peculiar missive. The address was not written, but formed of printed letters, carefully cut from a book, and pasted on the envelope.

"Oh, ho! what is this!" cried M. Verduret; then turning toward the man he said: "Wait a moment." He went into the next room, and closed the door behind him. There he found Prosper, anxious to know what was going on. "Here is a letter for you," observed M. Verduret.

Prosper at once tore open the envelope. Some bank-notes dropped out; he counted them; there were ten. The cashier turned very red. "What does this mean?" he asked.

"We will read the letter and find out," replied Verduret.

The letter, like the address, was composed of printed words cut out and pasted on a sheet of paper. It was short but explicit:

"My dear Prosper—A friend, who knows the horror of your situation, sends you this succor. There is one heart, be assured, that shares your sufferings. Go away—leave France. You are young; the future is before you. Go, and may this money bring you happiness!"

As M. Verduret read the note, Prosper's rage increased. He was angry and perplexed, for he could not explain the rapidly succeeding events which were so calculated to mystify his already confused brain. "Everybody wishes me to go away," he cried; "there is evidently a conspiracy against me."

M. Verduret smiled with satisfaction. "At last you begin to open your eyes, you begin to understand. Yes, there are people who hate you because of the wrong they have done you; there are people to whom your presence in Paris is a constant danger, and who will not feel safe till they are rid of you."

"But who are these people? Tell me, who dares send this money?"

"If I knew, my dear Prosper, my task would be at an end, for then I should know who committed the robbery. But we will continue our researches. I have finally procured evidence which will sooner or later become convincing proof. I have heretofore only made deductions more or less probable; I now possess knowledge which proves that I was not mistaken. I walked in darkness: now I have a light to guide me."

As Prosper listened to M. Verduret's reassuring words, he felt hope rising in his breast.

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"Now," said M. Verduret, "we must take advantage of this evidence, gained by the imprudence of our enemies, without delay. We will begin with the concierge."

He opened the door, and called out: "I say, my good man, step here a moment."

The concierge entered, looking very much surprised at the authority exercised over his lodger by this stranger.

"Who gave you this letter?" asked M. Verduret.

"A messenger, who said he was paid for bringing it."

"Do you know him?"

"I know him well; he is the commissionaire whose post is at the corner of the Rue Pigalle."

"Go and bring him here."

After the concierge had gone, M. Verduret drew his diary from his pocket and compared a page of it with the notes which he had spread over the table. "These notes were not sent by the thief," he said, after an attentive examination of them.

"Do you think so?"

"I am confident of it; that is, unless he is endowed with extraordinary penetration and forethought. One thing is certain: these ten thousand francs are not part of the three hundred and fifty thousand which were stolen from the safe."

"Yet," said Prosper, who could not account for this certainty on the part of his protector, "yet—"

"There is no yet about it: I have the numbers of all the stolen notes."

"What! When even I did not know them myself?"

"But the bank did, fortunately. When we undertake an affair we must anticipate everything, and forget nothing. It is a poor excuse for a man to say, 'I did not think of it,' when he commits some oversight. I thought of the bank."

If in the beginning Prosper had felt some repugnance about confiding in his father's friend, the feeling had now disappeared. He understood that alone, scarcely master of himself, governed only by the inspirations of inexperience, he would never have had the patient perspicacity of this singular man.

Verduret continued, talking to himself, as if he had absolutely forgotten Prosper's presence: "Then, as this missive did not come from the thief, it can only come from the other person, who was near the safe at the time of the robbery, but could not prevent it, and now feels remorse. The probability of two persons assisting at the robbery, a probability suggested by the

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scratch, is now converted into a certainty. *Ergo*, I was right." Prosper, listening attentively, tried hard to comprehend this monologue, which he dared not interrupt.

"Let us seek," the stout man went on to say, "this second person, whose conscience pricks him, and yet who dares not reveal anything." Here he read the letter over several times, scanning the sentences, and weighing every word. "Evidently this letter was composed by a woman," he finally said. "Never would a man doing another man a service, and sending him money, use the word 'succor.' A man would have said loan, money, or some other equivalent, but succor, never. No one but a woman, ignorant of masculine susceptibilities, would have naturally made use of this word to express the idea it represents. As to the sentence, 'There is one heart,' and so on, it could only have been written by a woman."

"You are mistaken, sir, I think," said Prosper; "no woman is mixed up in this affair."

M. Verduret paid no attention to this interruption; perhaps he did not hear it, perhaps he did not care to argue the matter. "Now, let us see if we can discover whence the printed words were taken to compose this letter."

He went to the window, and began to study the pasted words with all the scrupulous attention which an antiquary would devote to an old, half-effaced manuscript. "Small type," he said, "very slender and clear; the paper is thin and glossy. Consequently, these words have not been cut from a newspaper, magazine, or even a novel. Yet I have seen type like this—I recognize it, I am sure Didot often uses it, so does Mame of Tours."

He suddenly stopped, his mouth open, and his eyes fixed, appealing as though anxiously to his memory. Suddenly he struck his forehead exultingly. "Now I have it!" he cried; "now I have it! Why did I not see it at once? These words have all been cut from a prayer-book. We will look, at least, and then we shall be certain."

He moistened one of the words pasted on the paper with his tongue, and when it was sufficiently softened, he detached it with a pin. On the other side of this word was the Latin word, *Deus*.

"Ah, ah!" he exclaimed with a little laugh of satisfaction, "I knew it. Old Tabaret would be pleased to see this. But what has become of the mutilated prayer-book? Can it have

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been burned? No, because a heavy-bound book is not easily burned. It has been thrown aside in some corner."

He was here interrupted by the concierge, who returned with the commissionaire from the Rue Pigalle.

"Ah, here you are," said M. Verduret, encouragingly. Then he showed him the envelope of the letter, and asked: "Do you remember bringing this letter here this morning?"

"Perfectly, sir. I took particular notice of the direction; we don't often see anything like it."

"Who told you to bring it?—a gentleman or a lady?"

"Neither, sir, it was a commissionaire."

This reply made the concierge laugh very much, but not a muscle of M. Verduret's face moved.

"A commissionaire? Well, do you know this colleague of yours?"

"I never saw him before."

"What was he like?"

"He was neither tall nor short; he wore a green velvet jacket and his badge."

"Your description is so vague that it would suit every commissionaire in the city; but did your colleague tell you who sent the letter?"

"No, sir. He simply put ten sous in my hand, and said: 'Here, carry this to No. 39 Rue Chaptal; a cabman on the boulevard handed it to me.' Ten sous! I warrant you he made more than that by it."

This answer seemed to disconcert M. Verduret. The taking of so many precautions to send this letter disturbed him and upset all his plans.

"Do you think you would recognize the commissionaire again?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, if I saw him."

"How much do you gain a day as a commissionaire?"

"I can't exactly tell; but mine is a good corner, and I am busy going errands nearly all day. I suppose I make from eight to ten francs."

"Very well: I will give you ten francs a day if you will walk about the streets and look for the commissionaire who gave you this letter. Every evening, at eight o'clock, come to the Grand Archangel, on the Quai Saint Michel, to give me a report of your search and receive your pay. Ask for M. Verduret. If you find the man I will give you fifty francs. Do you agree?"

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"I should rather think I do."

"Then don't lose a minute. Start off!"

Although ignorant of M. Verduret's plans, Prosper began to comprehend the sense of his investigations. His fate depended upon their success, and yet he almost forgot this fact in his admiration of this singular man; for his energy, his bantering coolness when he wished to discover anything, the certainty of his deductions, the fertility of his expedients, and the rapidity of his movements, were astonishing.

"Do you still think, sir," said Prosper when the man had left the room, "you see a woman's hand in this affair?"

"More than ever; and a pious woman too, who has at least two prayer-books, since she could cut up one to write to you."

"And you hope to find the mutilated book?"

"I do, thanks to the opportunity I have of making an immediate search; which I will set about at once."

Saying this, he sat down, and rapidly scratched off a few lines on a slip of paper, which he folded up, and put in his waistcoat pocket. "Are you ready to go to M. Fauvel's?" he then asked. "Yes? Come on, then; we have certainly earned our lunch to-day."

VIII

WHEN Raoul de Lagors spoke of M. Fauvel's extraordinary dejection, he had been guilty of no exaggeration. Since the fatal day when, upon his denunciation, his cashier had been arrested, the banker, this active, energetic man of business, had been a prey to the most gloomy melancholy, and ceased to take any interest in the affairs of his banking-house.

He, who had always been so devoted to his family, never came near them except at meals, when as soon as he had swallowed a few mouthfuls, he would hastily leave the room. Shut up in his study, he would deny himself to visitors. His anxious countenance, his indifference to everybody and everything, his constant reveries and fits of abstraction, betrayed the presence of some fixed idea or of some hidden sorrow.

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The day of Prosper's release, about three o'clock, M. Fauvel was, as usual, seated in his study, with his elbows resting on the table, and his face buried in his hands, when his valet abruptly entered, and, with a frightened look, said:

"M. Bertomy, the former cashier, is here, sir, with one of his relatives; he says he must see you."

At these words the banker jumped up as if he had been shot at. "Prosper!" he cried in a voice choked by anger, "what! does he dare—" Then remembering that he ought to control himself before his servant, he waited a few moments, and said, in a tone of forced calmness: "Ask the gentlemen to walk in."

If M. Verduret had counted upon witnessing a strange and affecting scene, he was not disappointed. Nothing could be more terrible than the attitude of these two men as they stood confronting each other. The banker's face was almost purple with suppressed anger, and he looked as if he were about to be seized with a fit of apoplexy. Prosper was pale and motionless as a corpse. Silent and immovable, they stood glaring at each other with mortal hatred.

M. Verduret watched these two enemies with the indifference and coolness of a philosopher, who, in the most violent outbursts of human passion, merely see subjects for meditation and study. Finally, the silence becoming more and more threatening, he decided to break it by speaking to the banker:

"I suppose you know, sir," said he, "that my young relative has just been released from prison."

"Yes," replied M. Fauvel, making an effort to control himself, "yes, for want of sufficient proof."

"Exactly so, sir; and this want of proof, as stated in the decision of 'Not proven,' ruins the prospects of my relative, and compels him to leave here at once for America."

On hearing this statement, M. Fauvel's features relaxed as if he had been relieved of some fearful agony. "Ah, he is going away," he kept repeating, "he is going abroad." There was no mistaking the insulting intonation of the words; "going away!"

M. Verduret took no notice of M. Fauvel's manner. "It appears to me," he continued in an easy tone, "that Prosper's determination is a wise one. I merely wished him, before leaving Paris, to come and pay his respects to his former chief."

The banker smiled bitterly. "M. Bertomy might have spared us both this painful meeting. I have nothing to say to him, and of course he can have nothing to tell me."

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This was a formal dismissal; and M. Verduret, understanding it thus, bowed to M. Fauvel and left the room, accompanied by Prosper, who had not opened his lips.

They had reached the street before Prosper recovered the use of his tongue. "I hope you are satisfied, sir," said he in a gloomy tone. "You exacted this painful step, and I could but acquiesce. Have I gained anything by adding this humiliation to the others which I have had to suffer?"

"You have not, but I have," replied M. Verduret. "I could find no way of gaining access to M. Fauvel save through you; and now I have found out what I wanted to know. I am convinced that M. Fauvel had nothing to do with the robbery."

"But you know, sir, innocence can be feigned," objected Prosper.

"Certainly, but not to this extent. And this is not all. I wished to find out if M. Fauvel would be accessible to certain suspicions. I can now confidently reply 'yes.'"

Prosper and his companion had stopped to talk more at their ease near the corner of Rue Lafitte, in the middle of a large space which had lately been cleared by pulling down an old house. M. Verduret seemed to be anxious, and was constantly looking around as if he expected some one. He soon uttered an exclamation of satisfaction. At the other end of the vacant space he saw Cavaillon, who was bareheaded and running.

The latter was so excited that he did not even stop to shake hands with Prosper, but darted up to M. Verduret, and said: "They have gone, sir!"

"How long since?"

"They went about a quarter of an hour ago."

"The deuce they did! Then we have not an instant to lose."

He handed Cavaillon the note he had written some hours before at Prosper's house.

"Here, pass this on, and then return at once to your desk; you might be missed. It was very imprudent of you to come out without your hat."

Cavaillon ran off as quickly as he had come. Prosper was astounded. "What!" he exclaimed. "You know Cavaillon?"

"So it seems," answered M. Verduret with a smile. "But we have no time to talk; come on, we must hurry!"

"Where are we going now?"

"You will soon know; let us walk fast!" And he set the example by striding rapidly toward the Rue Lafayette. As

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they went along he continued talking more to himself than to Prosper.

"Ah," said he, "it is not by putting both feet in one shoe that one wins a race. The trace once found, we should never rest an instant. When the savage discovers the footprints of an enemy he follows it persistently, knowing that falling rain or a gust of wind may efface the footprints at any moment. It is the same with us; the most trifling incident may destroy the traces we are following up."

M. Verduret suddenly stopped before a door bearing the number 81. "We are going in here," he said to Prosper; "come along."

They went upstairs, and stopped on the second floor before a door over which was inscribed, "Modes and Confections." A handsome bell-rope was hanging against the wall, but M. Verduret did not touch it. He tapped with the ends of his fingers in a peculiar way, and the door instantly opened, as if some one had been watching for his signal on the other side.

A neatly dressed woman of about forty received Verduret and Prosper, and quietly ushered them into a small dining-room with several doors opening into it. This woman bowed respectfully to M. Verduret, as if he were some superior being. He scarcely noticed her salutation, but questioned her with a look, which asked, "Well?"

She nodded affirmatively, "Yes."

"In there?" asked M. Verduret in a low tone, pointing to one of the doors.

"No," replied the woman in the same tone; "there, in the little parlor."

M. Verduret opened the door of the room indicated, and pushed Prosper forward, whispering as he did so, "Go in, and keep your presence of mind."

But this injunction was useless. The instant he cast his eyes round the room into which he had so unceremoniously been pushed without any warning, Prosper exclaimed in a startled voice: "Madeleine!"

It was indeed M. Fauvel's niece, looking more beautiful than ever. Hers was that calm, dignified beauty which imposes admiration and respect. Standing in the middle of the room, near a table covered with silks and satins, she was arranging a skirt of red velvet embroidered in gold; probably the dress she was to wear as maid of honor to Catherine de Medicis. At sight

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of Prosper, all the blood rushed to her face, and her beautiful eyes half closed, as if she were about to faint; she clung to the table to prevent herself from falling.

Prosper well knew that Madeleine was not one of those cold-hearted women whom nothing could disturb, and who feel sensations, but never a true sentiment. Of a tender, dreamy nature, she betrayed in the minute details of her life the most exquisite delicacy. But she was also proud, and incapable in any way of violating her conscience. When duty spoke, she obeyed.

She recovered from her momentary weakness, and the soft expression of her eyes changed to one of haughty resentment. In an offended tone she said: "What has emboldened you, sir, to be watching my movements? Who gave you permission to follow me—to enter this house?"

Prosper was certainly innocent. He longed with a word to explain what had just happened, but he was powerless to do so, and could only remain silent.

"You promised me upon your honor, sir," continued Madeleine, "that you would never again seek my presence. Is this the way you keep your word?"

"I did promise, mademoiselle, but—" He stopped.

"Oh, speak!"

"So many things have happened since that terrible day that I think I am excusable in forgetting for one hour an oath torn from me in a moment of blind weakness. It is to chance, at least to another will than my own, that I am indebted for the happiness of once more finding myself near you. Alas! the instant I saw you my heart bounded with joy. I did not think—no, I could not think—that you would prove more pitiless than strangers have been, that you would cast me off when I am so miserable and heartbroken."

Had not Prosper been so agitated he could have read in Madeleine's eyes—those beautiful eyes which had so long been the arbiters of his destiny—the signs of a great inward struggle.

It was, however, in a firm voice that she replied: "You know me well enough, Prosper, to be sure that no blow can strike you without reaching me at the same time. You suffer, I suffer with you: I pity you as a sister would pity a beloved brother."

"A sister!" said Prosper bitterly. "Yes, that was the word you used the day you banished me from your presence. A sister! Then why during three years did you delude me with vain hopes? Was I a brother to you the day we went to Notre

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Dame de Fourvières—that day when, at the foot of the altar, we swore to love each other forever and ever, and you fastened around my neck a holy relic, and said, 'Wear this always for my sake; never part from it, and it will bring you good fortune?' "

Madeleine attempted to interrupt him by a supplicating gesture; but he did not heed it, and continued with increased bitterness: "One month after that happy day—a year ago—you gave me back my promise, told me to consider myself free from any engagement, and never to come near you again. If I could have discovered in what way I had offended you—but no, you refused to explain. You drove me away, and to obey you I let every one suppose that I had left you of my own accord. You told me that an invincible obstacle had arisen between us, and I believed you, fool that I was! The obstacle was your own heart, Madeleine. I have always worn the relic; but it has not brought me happiness or good fortune."

Pale and motionless as a statue, Madeleine listened with bowed head and weeping eyes to these passionate reproaches.

"I told you to forget me," she murmured.

"Forget!" exclaimed Prosper excitedly, "forget! Can I forget? Is it in my power to stop, by an effort of will, the circulation of my blood? Ah! you have never loved! To forget, as to stop the beatings of the heart, there is but one means—death!"

This word, uttered with the fixed determination of a desperate, reckless man, caused Madeleine to shudder.

"Miserable man!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, miserable man, and a thousand times more miserable than you can imagine! You can never understand the tortures I have suffered, when for a year past I have awoke every morning, and said to myself, 'It is all over, she has ceased to love me!' This great sorrow stares me in the face day and night in spite of all my efforts to dispel it. And you speak of forgetting! I sought it in poisoned cups, but found it not. I tried to extinguish this memory of the past, which burns within me like a devouring flame, but in vain. When my body succumbed, my pitiless thoughts still survived. Do you wonder, then, that I should seek that rest which can only be obtained by suicide?"

"I forbid you to utter that word."

"You forget, Madeleine, that you have no right to forbid me now you love me no more."

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With an imperious gesture, Madeleine interrupted him as if she wished to speak, and perhaps to explain all, to exculpate herself. But a sudden thought arrested her; she clasped her hands despairingly, and cried: "My God! this suffering is beyond endurance!"

Prosper seemed to misconstrue her words. "Your pity comes too late," he said. "There is no happiness in store for one like myself, who has had a glimpse of divine felicity, has had the cup of bliss held to his lips, and then dashed to the ground. There is nothing left to attach me to life. You have destroyed my holiest belief. I come forth from prison disgraced by my enemies; what is to become of me? Vainly do I question the future; for me there is no hope of happiness. I look around me to see nothing but abandonment, ignominy, and despair!"

"Prosper, my brother, my friend, if you only knew—"

"I know but one thing, Madeleine, which is, that you no longer love me, and that I love you more madly than ever. Oh, Madeleine, God only knows how I love you!"

He was silent. He hoped for an answer. None came. But suddenly the silence was broken by a stifled sob. It was Madeleine's maid, who, seated in a corner, was weeping bitterly. Madeleine had forgotten her presence.

Prosper on entering the room was so amazed on finding himself in the presence of Madeleine, that he noticed nothing else. With a feeling of surprise, he turned and looked at the weeping woman. He was not mistaken; this neatly dressed waiting-maid was Nina Gipsy.

Prosper was so startled that he became perfectly dumb. He stood there with ashy lips, and a chilly sensation creeping through his veins. He was terrified at the position in which he found himself. He was there, between the two women who had ruled his fate; between Madeleine, the proud heiress who spurned his love, and Nina Gipsy, the poor girl whose devotion to him he had so disdainfully rejected. And she had heard all! Poor Nina had heard the passionate avowal of her lover, had heard him swear that he could never love any woman but Madeleine, that if his love were not reciprocated he would kill himself, as he had nothing else to live for.

Prosper could judge of her sufferings by his own. For she was wounded not only in the present, but in the past. What must be her humiliation and anger on hearing the miserable part which he, in his disappointed love, had imposed upon her?

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He was astonished that Nina—violence itself—remained silently weeping, instead of rising and bitterly denouncing him.

Meanwhile Madeleine had succeeded in recovering her usual calmness. Slowly and almost unconsciously she had put on her bonnet and mantle, which were lying on the sofa. Then she approached Prosper, and said: "Why did you come here? We both have need of all the courage we can command. You are unhappy, Prosper: I am more than unhappy, I am most wretched. You have a right to complain: I have not the right to shed a tear. While my heart is slowly breaking, I must wear a smiling face. You can seek consolation in the bosom of a friend: I can have no confidant but God."

Prosper tried to murmur a reply, but his pale lips refused to articulate; he was stifling. "I wish to tell you," continued Madeleine, "that I have forgotten nothing. But oh! let not this knowledge give you any hope: the future is blank for us; but if you love me you will live. You will not, I know, add to my already heavy burden of sorrow the agony of mourning your death. For my sake, live; live the life of a good man, and perhaps the day will come when I can justify myself in your eyes. And now, O my brother, O my only friend, adieu! adieu!" She pressed a kiss upon his brow, and rushed from the room, followed by Nina Gipsy!

Prosper was alone. He seemed to be awaking from a troubled dream. He tried to think over what had just happened, and asked himself if he were losing his mind, or whether he had really spoken to Madeleine and seen Nina? He was obliged to attribute all this to the mysterious power of the strange man whom he had seen for the first time that very morning. How did this individual gain this wonderful power of controlling events to suit his own purposes? He seemed to anticipate everything, to know everything. He was acquainted with Cavaillon, he knew all Madeleine's movements; he had made even Nina become humble and submissive.

While thinking over this, Prosper had reached such a degree of exasperation, that when M. Verduret entered the little parlor, he strode toward him white with rage, and, in a threatening voice, exclaimed:

"Who are you?"

The stout man did not manifest any surprise at this burst of anger, but quietly answered: "A friend of your father's; did you not know it?"

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"That, sir, is no answer; I have been surprised into being influenced by a stranger, but now—"

"Do you want my biography—what I have been, what I am, and what I may be? What difference does it make to you? I told you that I would save you; the main point is that I am saving you."

"Still I have the right to ask by what means you are saving me."

"What good will it do you to know what my plans are?"

"In order to decide whether I will accept or reject them."

"But suppose I guarantee success?"

"That is not sufficient. I do not choose to be any longer deprived of my own free will—to be exposed, without warning, to trials like those I have undergone to-day. A man of my age must know what he is doing."

"A man of your age, Prosper, when he is blind, takes a guide, and does not undertake to point out the way to his leader."

The half-bantering, half-commiserating tone of M. Verduret was not calculated to calm Prosper's irritation.

"That being the case, sir," he exclaimed, "I will thank you for your past services, and decline them for the future, as I have no need of them. If I attempted to defend my honor and my life, it was because I hoped that Madeleine would be restored to me. I have been convinced to-day that all is at an end between us; I retire from the struggle, and care not what becomes of me now."

Prosper was so decided that M. Verduret seemed alarmed. "You must be mad," he firmly said.

"No, unfortunately I am not. Madeleine has ceased to love me, and of what importance is anything else?"

His heartbroken tone aroused M. Verduret's sympathy, and he said in a kind, soothing voice: "Then you suspect nothing? You did not fathom the meaning of what she said?"

"You were listening?" cried Prosper fiercely.

"I certainly was."—"Sir!"

"Yes. It was a presumptuous thing to do, perhaps, but the end justified the means in this instance. I am glad I did listen, because it enables me to say to you: Take courage, Prosper; Mademoiselle Madeleine loves you—she has never ceased to love you."

Like a dying man who eagerly listens to deceitful promises of recovery, although he feels himself sinking into the grave,

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Prosper felt his sad heart cheered by M. Verduret's assertion. "Oh," he murmured, suddenly calmed, "if I only could hope!"

"Rely upon me, I am not mistaken. Ah, I could see the torture endured by this generous girl while she struggled between her love and what she believed to be her duty. Were you not convinced of her love when she bade you farewell?"

"She loves me, she is free, and yet she shuns me."

"No, she is not free! In breaking off her engagement with you, she was governed by some powerful, irrepressible event. She is sacrificing herself—for whom? We shall soon know; and the secret of her self-sacrifice will reveal to us the secret of the plot against you."

As M. Verduret spoke, Prosper felt his resolutions of revolt slowly melting away, and their place occupied by confidence and hope. "If what you say were only true!" he mournfully said.

"Foolish young man! Why do you persist in obstinately shutting your eyes to the proof I place before you? Can you not see that Mademoiselle Madeleine knows who the thief is? Yes, you need not look so shocked; she knows the thief, but no human power can tear it from her. She sacrifices you, but then she almost has the right, since she first sacrificed herself."

Prosper was almost convinced; and it nearly broke his heart to leave the little apartment where he had seen Madeleine. "Alas!" he said, pressing M. Verduret's hand, "you must think me a ridiculous fool! but you don't know how I suffer."

The man with the red whiskers sadly shook his head, and his voice sounded very unsteady as he replied in a low tone: "What you suffer, I have suffered. Like you, I loved, not a pure, noble girl, yet a girl fair to look upon. For three years I was at her feet, a slave to her every whim, when one day she suddenly deserted me who adored her, to throw herself into the arms of a man who despised her. Then, like you, I wished to die. Neither threats nor entreaties could induce her to return to me. Passion never reasons, and she loved my rival."

"And did you know who this rival was?"

"Yes, I knew."

"And you did not seek revenge?"

"No," replied M. Verduret. And with a singular expression he added: "For fate charged itself with my vengeance."

For a minute Prosper was silent; then he said: "I have finally decided. My honor is a sacred trust for which I must

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account to my family. I am ready to follow you to the end of the world; dispose of me as you judge proper."

That same day Prosper, faithful to his promise, sold his furniture, and wrote to his friends announcing his intended departure for San Francisco. In the evening he and M. Verduret installed themselves at the hotel of the Grand Archangel.

Madame Alexandre gave Prosper her prettiest room, but it was very ugly compared with the coquettish little drawing-room in the Rue Chaptal. His state of mind did not permit him, however, to notice the difference between his former and present quarters. He lay on an old sofa, meditating upon the events of the day, and feeling a bitter satisfaction in his isolated condition. About eleven o'clock he thought he would open the window and let the cool air fan his burning brow; as he did so, a piece of paper was blown from among the folds of the window-curtain and lay at his feet on the floor.

Prosper mechanically picked it up and looked at it. It was covered with writing, the handwriting of Nina Gipsy; he could not be mistaken about that. It was the fragment of a torn letter; and if the half sentences did not convey any clear meaning, they were sufficient to lead the mind into all sorts of conjectures.

The fragment read as follows:

"of M. Raoul, I have been very im . . . plotted against him, of whom never . . . warn Prosper, and then . . . best friend, he . . . hand of Mademoiselle Ma . . ."

Prosper never closed his eyes all that night.

IX

NOT far from the Palais Royal, in the Rue St. Honore, is the sign of "La Bonne Foi," a small establishment, half cafe and half fruiterer's shop, much frequented by the workpeople of the neighborhood.

It was in this modest cafe that Prosper, the day after his release, awaited M. Verduret, who had promised to meet him at four o'clock. Just as the clock struck the hour, M. Verduret,

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who was punctuality itself, appeared. He was more red-faced and self-satisfied, if possible, than on the day before. As soon as the waiter, of whom he ordered a glass of beer, had left them, M. Verduret said to Prosper: "Well, are all our commissions executed?"

"Yes, every one."

"Have you seen the costumier?"

"I gave him your letter, and everything you ordered will be sent to the Grand Archangel to-morrow."

"Very good; you have not lost time, neither have I. I have a lot of news for you."

The "Bonne Foi" is almost deserted at four o'clock. The hour of coffee is passed, and the hour for absinthe has not yet come. M. Verduret and Prosper could therefore talk at their ease without fear of being overheard by listening neighbors. The former drew forth his precious diary, which, like the enchanted book in the fairy-tale, had an answer for every question. "While awaiting our emissaries whom I appointed to meet me here," said he, "let us devote a little time to M. de Lagors."

At this name Prosper did not protest, as he had done the previous day. Like those imperceptible insects which having once penetrated the root of a tree devour it in a single night, suspicion, when it invades our minds, soon develops itself and destroys our firmest beliefs. De Lagors's visit and the fragment of Gipsy's letter had filled Prosper with suspicions which had grown stronger and more settled as time went on.

"Do you know, my dear friend," asked M. Verduret, "what part of France this devoted friend of yours comes from?"

"He was born at St. Remy, which is also Madame Fauvel's native town."

"Are you certain of that?"

"Oh, perfectly! He has not only often told me so, but I have heard him tell M. Fauvel; and he would talk to Madame Fauvel by the hour about his mother, who was cousin to Madame Fauvel, and dearly beloved by her."

"Then you think there is no possible doubt or error about this part of his story?"

"None in the least."

"Well, things are assuming a queer appearance," said M. Verduret. And he began to whistle between his teeth, which, with him, was a sign of intense inward satisfaction.

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"What do you refer to?" inquired Prosper.

"To what I have just discovered—to what I have all along expected. Good people!" he exclaimed, imitating the manner of a showman at a fair, "it is a lovely town, St. Remy, with six thousand inhabitants, charming boulevards on the site of the old fortifications, handsome town hall, numerous fountains, large charcoal market, silk factories, famous hospital, and so on."

Prosper was on thorns. "Please be so good," said he, "as to explain what you—"

"It also contains," continued M. Verduret, "a Roman triumphal arch, which is of unparalleled beauty, and a Greek mausoleum; but no De Lagors. St. Remy is the native town of Nostradamus, but not of your friend."

"Yet I have had proofs."

"Naturally. But proofs can be fabricated; relatives can be improvised. Your evidence is open to suspicion. My information is undeniable, perfectly authenticated. While you were pining in prison, I was preparing my batteries and collecting ammunition to open fire. I wrote to St. Remy, and received answers to my questions."

"Will you not let me know what they were?"

"Have patience," said M. Verduret as he turned over the leaves of his dairy. "Ah, here is number one. Bow to it respectfully, 'tis official." He then read:

"'De Lagors—Very old family, originally from Maillane, settled at St. Remy about a century ago—'"

"I told you so," cried Prosper.

"Pray allow me to finish," said M. Verduret.

"'The last of the De Lagors (Jules Rene Henri), bearing without clear authority the title of count, married in 1829 Mademoiselle Rosalie Clarisse Fontanet of Tarascon; died December, 1848, leaving two daughters, but no male issue. The town registers make no mention of any person in the district bearing the name of De Lagors.'"

"Now what do you think of this information?" asked the stout man with a triumphant smile.

Prosper was astounded. "But why, then, does M. Fauvel treat Raoul as his nephew?" he asked.

"Ah, you mean as his wife's nephew! Let us examine note number two: it is not official, but it throws a valuable light upon your friend's income of twenty thousand francs.

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"'Jules Rene Henri de Lagors, last of his name, died at St. Remy on the 29th of December, 1848, in a state verging on poverty. He at one time was possessed of a moderate fortune, but invested it in a nursery for silkworms, and lost it all.

"'He had no son, but left two daughters, one of whom is a teacher at Aix, and the other married to a small tradesman at Orgon. His widow, who lives at Montagnette, is supported entirely by one of her relatives, the wife of a rich banker in Paris. No person of the name of De Lagors lives in the district of Arles.'"

"That is all," said M. Verduret; "do you think it enough?"

"Really, sir, I don't know whether I am awake or dreaming."

"You will be awake after awhile. Now, I wish to mention one thing. Some people may assert that the widow of De Lagors had a child born after her husband's death. This objection is destroyed by the age of your friend. Raoul is twenty-four, and M. de Lagors has not been dead twenty years."

"But," observed Prosper, thoughtfully, "who then can Raoul be?"

"I don't know. The fact is, I am more perplexed to find out who he is than to know who he is not. There is one man who could give us all the information we seek, but he will take good care to keep his mouth shut."

"You mean M. de Clameran?"

"Him, and no one else."

"I have always felt the most inexplicable aversion toward him. Ah, if we could only get an account of his life!"

"I have been furnished with a few notes concerning the De Clameran family by your father, who knew them well; they are brief, but I expect more."

"What did my father tell you?"

"Nothing favorable, you may be sure. I will read you the synopsis of his information:

"'Louis de Clameran was born at the Chateau de Clameran, near Tarascon. He had an elder brother named Gaston, who, in consequence of an affray in which he had the misfortune to kill a man and badly wound another, was compelled to fly the country in 1842. Gaston was an honest, noble youth, universally beloved. Louis, on the contrary, was a wicked, despicable fellow, detested by all who knew him.

"'Upon the death of his father, Louis came to Paris, and

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in less than two years had squandered not only his own patrimony, but also the share of his exiled brother. Ruined and harassed by debt, Louis entered the army, but behaved so disgracefully that he was constantly being punished. After leaving the army we lose sight of him; all that is known is that he went to England, and thence to a German gambling resort, where he became notorious for his scandalous conduct.

"'In 1865 we find him again in Paris. He was in great poverty, and his associates were among the most depraved classes. But he suddenly heard of the return of his brother Gaston to France. Gaston had made a fortune in Mexico; but being still a young man, and accustomed to a very active life, he purchased near Olcoron an iron foundry, intending to spend the remainder of his life in working it. Six months ago he died in the arms of his brother Louis. His death provided our De Clameran with an immense fortune, and the title of marquis.'"

"Then," said Prosper, "from all this I judge that M. de Clameran was very poor when I met him for the first time at M. Fauvel's?"

"Evidently."

"And shortly afterward De Lagors arrived from the country?"

"Precisely."

"And about a month after his appearance, Madeleine suddenly dismissed me?"

"Good," exclaimed M. Verduret, "I am glad you are beginning to understand the state of affairs." He was here interrupted by the entrance of a stranger. The newcomer was a dandified-looking coachman, with elegant black whiskers, shining boots with light tops, a yellow cap, and a red and black striped waistcoat. After cautiously looking round the room, he walked straight up to the table where M. Verduret sat.

"What is the news, Master Joseph Dubois?" asked the stout man eagerly.

"Ah, my chief, don't ask me!" answered the man. "Things are getting warm, very warm."

Prosper concentrated all his attention upon this superb servant. He thought he recognized his face. He had certainly somewhere seen that retreating forehead and those little restless black eyes, but where and when he could not remember. Meanwhile Master Joseph had taken a seat at a table adjoining the one occupied by M. Verduret and Prosper; and, having

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called for some absinthe, was preparing it by holding the water aloft and slowly dropping it into the glass.

"What have you to tell me?" inquired M. Verduret.

"In the first place, my chief, I must say that the position of valet and coachman to M. de Clameran is by no means a bed of roses."

"Go on; come to the point. You can complain to-morrow."

"Very good. Yesterday my master walked out at two o'clock. I, of course, followed him. Do you know where he went? The thing was as good as a farce. He went to the Grand 'Archangel to see Madame Nina Gipsy."

"Well, make haste. They told him she was gone. What then?"

"What then? Ah! he was not at all pleased, I can tell you. He hurried back to the hotel where the other, M. de Lagors, awaited him. He swore like a trooper, and M. Raoul asked him what had happened to put him in such a bad humor. 'Nothing,' replied my master, 'except that the little devil has run off, and no one knows where she is; she has slipped through our fingers.' Then they both appeared to be vexed and uneasy. De Lagors asked if she knew anything serious. 'She knows nothing but what I told you,' replied De Clameran; 'but this nothing, falling into the ear of a man with any suspicions, will be more than enough to work on.'"

M. Verduret smiled like a man who had his reasons for appreciating at their just value De Clameran's fears. "Well, your master is not without sense after all," said he; "don't you think he showed it by saying that?"

"Yes, my chief. Then De Lagors exclaimed: 'If it is as serious as that, we must get rid of the little beggar!' But my master shrugged his shoulders, and, laughing loudly, said: 'You talk like an idiot; when one is annoyed by a woman of this sort, one must take measures to get rid of her administratively.' This idea seemed to amuse them both very much."

"I can understand their being entertained by it," said M. Verduret; "it is an excellent idea; but the misfortune is, it is too late to carry it out. The nothing which made De Clameran uneasy has already fallen into a knowing ear."

With breathless curiosity, Prosper listened to this report, every word of which seemed to throw light upon past events. Now, he thought, he understood the fragment of Gipsy's letter. He saw that this Raoul, in whom he had confided so deeply,

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was nothing better than a scoundrel. A thousand little circumstances, unnoticed at the time, now recurred to his mind, and made him wonder how he could have remained blind so long.

Master Joseph Dubois continued his report:

"Yesterday, after dinner, my master decked himself out like a bridegroom. I shaved him, curled his hair, and perfumed him with especial care, after which I drove him to the Rue de Provence to call on Madame Fauvel."

"What!" exclaimed Prosper, "after the insulting language he used the day of the robbery, did he dare to visit the house?"

"Yes, my young gentleman; he not only dared this, but he also stayed there until nearly midnight, to my great discomfort; for I got thoroughly drenched while waiting for him."

"How did he look when he came out?" asked M. Verduret.

"Well, he certainly looked less pleased than when he went in. After putting up my carriage, and rubbing down my horse, I went to see if he wanted anything; I found the door locked, and he abused me without stint through the keyhole."

And to assist the digestion of this insult, Master Joseph here gulped down a mouthful of absinthe.

"Is that all?" questioned M. Verduret.

"All that occurred yesterday, my chief; but this morning my master rose late, still in a horribly bad humor. At noon Raoul arrived, also in a rage. They at once began to dispute, and there was such a row! Why, the most abandoned thieves would have blushed at their foul language. At one time my master seized the other by the throat and shook him like a reed. But Raoul was too quick for him, and saved himself from strangulation by drawing out a sharp-pointed knife, the sight of which made my master drop him in a hurry, I can tell you."

"But what was it that they said?"

"Ah, there is the rub, my chief," replied Joseph in a piteous tone; "the scamps spoke English, so I could not understand them. But I am sure they were disputing about money."

"How do you know that?"

"Because in view of the Exhibition I learned the word money in every language, and it constantly recurred in their conversation."

M. Verduret sat with knit brows, talking in an undertone to himself; and Prosper, who was watching him, wondered if he was trying to divine the subject of the dispute by the mere force of reflection.

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"When they had done fighting," continued Joseph, "the rascals began to talk in French again; but they only spoke of a fancy ball which is to be given by some banker. When Raoul was leaving, my master said: 'Since this thing is inevitable, and must take place to-day, you had better remain at home, at Vesinet, this evening.' Raoul replied: 'Of course.'"

Evening was approaching, and the cafe was gradually filling with customers, who were all together calling for either absinthe or bitters. The waiters, mounting on stools, lit the gas-burners placed round the room. "It is time to go," said M. Verduret to Joseph, "your master may want you; besides, here is some one come for me. I will see you to-morrow."

The newcomer was no other than Cavaillon, more troubled and frightened than ever. He looked uneasily around, as if he expected a posse of policemen to make their appearance, and carry him off to prison. He did not sit down at M. Verduret's table, but stealthily gave his hand to Prosper, and, after assuring himself that no one was observing them, handed M. Verduret a parcel, saying: "She found this in the cupboard."

It was a handsomely bound prayer-book. M. Verduret rapidly turned over the leaves, and soon found the pages from which the words pasted on Prosper's letter had been cut. "I had moral proofs," he said, handing the book to Prosper, "but here is material proof sufficient in itself to save you."

When Prosper looked at the book, he turned as pale as a ghost. He recognized it instantly. He had given it to Madeleine in exchange for the relic. He opened it, and on the fly-leaf Madeleine had written "Souvenir of Notre Dame de Fourvieres, 17th January, 1866." "This book belongs to Madeleine," he cried.

M. Verduret did not reply, but walked toward a young man dressed like a wine cooper, who had just entered the cafe. Glancing at a note which this person handed to him, he hastened back to the table, and said in an agitated voice: "I think we have got them now!"

Throwing a five-franc piece on the table, and without saying a word to Cavaillon, M. Verduret seized Prosper's arm, and hurried from the room. "What a fatality!" he said, as he hastened along the street: "we may perhaps miss them. We shall certainly reach the St. Lazare station too late for the St. Germain train."

"For heaven's sake, where are you going?" asked Prosper.

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"Never mind, we can talk after we start. Hurry!"

On arriving at the Place du Palais Royal, M. Verduret stopped in front of one of the cabs stationed there, and examined the horses at a glance. "How much will you want for driving us to Vesinet?" he asked the driver.

"I don't know the road very well," replied the cabman.

The name of Vesinet was enough for Prosper. "I will point out the road," he quickly said.

"Well," said the driver, "at this time of night, in such dreadful weather; it ought to be—twenty-five francs—"

"And to drive very fast?"

"Bless my soul! Why, I leave that to your honor's generosity; but if you put it at thirty-five francs—"

"You shall have a hundred," interrupted M. Verduret, "if you overtake a vehicle which has half an hour's start of us."

"By Jingo!" cried the delighted driver; "jump in quick: we are losing time!" And whipping up his lean horses, he galloped them down the Rue de Valois at a fearful speed.

X

ON quitting the little station of Vesinet, we come upon two roads. One, to the left, macadamized and kept in perfect repair, leads to the village, and along it glimpses are here and there obtained of the new church through the openings between the trees. The other road, newly laid out and scarcely leveled, leads through the woods. Along the latter, which before the lapse of five years will be a busy street, are a few houses, tasteless in design, rising here and there out of the foliage: rural retreats of Paris tradesmen, occupied only during the summer.

It was at the junction of these two roads that Prosper stopped the cab. The driver had gained his hundred francs. The horses were completely worn out, but they had accomplished all that was expected of them; M. Verduret could distinguish the lamps of another cab, about fifty yards ahead of him.

M. Verduret jumped out, and handing the driver a hundred-franc note, said: "Here is what I promised you. Go to the

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first tavern on the right-hand side of the road as you enter the village. If we do not meet you there in an hour, you will be at liberty to return to Paris."

The driver was overwhelming in his thanks; but neither Prosper nor his friend heard them. They had already started along the new road. The weather, which had been inclement when they set out, was now fearful. The rain fell in torrents, and a furious wind howled dismally through the woods. The intense darkness was rendered more dreary by the occasional glimmer of the lamps of the distant railway station, and which seemed about to be extinguished by every fresh gust of wind.

M. Verduret and Prosper had been running along the muddy road for about five minutes, when suddenly the latter stopped and said: "This is Raoul's house."

Before the iron gate of an isolated house was the cab which M. Verduret had followed. In spite of the pouring rain, the driver, wrapped in a thick cloak, and leaning back on his seat, was already fast asleep, while waiting for the person whom he had brought to the house a few minutes ago.

M. Verduret pulled his cloak, and said, in a low voice: "Wake up, my good man."

The driver started, and mechanically gathering up his reins, yawned out: "I am ready; jump in!" But when, by the light of his lamps, he caught sight of two men in this lonely spot, he concluded they meant to rob him, and perhaps to take his life. "I am engaged!" he cried out, as he shook his whip; "I am waiting here for some one."

"I know that, you fool," replied M. Verduret, "and only wish to ask you a question, which you can gain five francs by answering. Did you not bring a middle-aged lady here?"

This question, with the promise of five francs, far from reassuring the cabman, only increased his alarm. "I have already told you I am waiting for some one," he said; "and if you don't go away and leave me alone, I will call out for help."

M. Verduret drew back quickly. "Come away," he whispered to Prosper, "the fool will do as he says; and the alarm once given, farewell to our projects. We must find some other entrance than by the gate."

They then went along the wall surrounding the garden, in search of a place where it was possible to scale it. This was difficult to discover, the wall being twelve feet high, and the night very dark. Fortunately, M. Verduret was very agile; and,

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having decided upon the spot to be scaled, he drew back a few paces, and making a sudden spring, seized hold of one of the projecting stones on the top; then drawing himself up by the aid of his hands and feet, soon found himself astride the wall.

It was now Prosper's turn to climb up; but, though much younger than his companion, he had not his agility and strength, and would never have succeeded if M. Verduret had not pulled him up and then helped him down on the other side.

Once in the garden, M. Verduret looked about him to study the situation. The house occupied by M. de Lagors stood in the middle of a large garden. It was narrow, two stories high, and had attics. In only one window, on the second story, was there any light.

"As you have often been here," said M. Verduret, "you must know all about the arrangement of the house: what room is that where we see the light?"

"That is Raoul's bedchamber."

"Very good. What rooms are on the ground floor?"

"The kitchen, pantry, billiard-room, and dining-room."

"And on the floor above?"

"Two drawing-rooms, separated by folding-doors and a study."

"Where do the servants sleep?"

"Raoul has none at present. He is waited on by a man and his wife, who live at Vesinet; they come in the morning, and leave after dinner."

M. Verduret rubbed his hands gleefully. "That suits our plans exactly," he said; "it will be strange if we do not hear what Raoul has to say to this person who has come from Paris at this time of night to see him. Let us go in."

Prosper seemed averse to this, and said: "That would be a serious thing for us to do."

"Bless my soul! what else did we come here for?" exclaimed M. Verduret. "Did you think ours was a pleasure trip, merely to enjoy this lovely weather?" continued he in a bantering tone.

"But we might be discovered."

"Suppose we are? If the least noise betrays our presence, you have only to advance boldly as a friend come to visit a friend, and who, finding the door open, walked in."

But unfortunately the heavy oak door was locked. M. Verduret shook it in vain. "How foolish!" he said with vexation, "I ought to have brought my instruments with me. A common

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lock which could be opened with a nail, and I have not even a piece of wire!" Seeing it useless to attempt the door, he tried successively every window on the ground floor. Alas! each shutter was securely fastened on the inside.

M. Verduret was provoked. He prowled round the house like a fox round a hen-roost, seeking an entrance, but finding none. Despairingly he came back to the spot in front of the house, whence he had the best view of the lighted window. "If I could only look in," he said. "To think that in there," and he pointed to the window, "is the solution of the mystery; and we are cut off from it by thirty feet or so of wall!"

Prosper was more surprised than ever at his companion's strange behavior. The latter seemed perfectly at home in this garden, and ran about it without any precaution. One would have supposed him accustomed to such expeditions, especially when he spoke of picking the lock of an occupied house, as coolly as though he were talking of opening a snuff-box. He was utterly indifferent to the rain and sleet driven in his face by the gusts of wind as he splashed about in the mud trying to find some means of entrance. "I must get a peep into that window," he said, "and I will certainly do so, cost what it may!"

Prosper seemed to suddenly remember something. "There is a ladder here," he remarked in an undertone.

"Why did you not tell me that before? Where is it?"

"At the end of the garden, under the trees."

They ran to the spot, and in a few minutes the ladder was standing against the house. But to their annoyance they found it five feet too short. Five long feet of wall between the top of the ladder and the lighted window was a discouraging sight to Prosper, who exclaimed: "We can not reach it."

"We *can* reach it," cried M. Verduret triumphantly. And quickly seizing the ladder, he cautiously raised it, and rested the bottom round on his shoulders, holding, at the same time, the two uprights firmly and steadily with his hands. The obstacle was overcome. "Now mount," he said to his companion.

Prosper did not hesitate. Enthusiasm at seeing difficulties so skilfully conquered, and the hope of triumph, gave him a strength and agility which he had never imagined he possessed. He climbed up gently till he reached the lower rounds, then quickly mounted the ladder, which swayed and trembled beneath his weight.

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But he had scarcely looked in at the lighted window when he uttered a cry, which was drowned in the roaring tempest, and sliding part way down the ladder, he dropped like a log on the wet grass, exclaiming: "The villain! the villain!"

With wonderful promptitude and vigor M. Verduret laid the ladder on the ground, and ran toward Prosper, fearing he was dangerously injured. "Are you hurt? What did you see?" he asked.

But Prosper had already risen. Although he had had a violent fall, he felt nothing; he was in that state when mind governs matter so absolutely that the body is insensible to pain. "I saw," he answered in a hoarse voice, "I saw Madeleine —do you understand, Madeleine?—in that room, alone with Raoul."

M. Verduret was confounded. Was it possible that he, the infallible expert, had been mistaken in his deductions?

He well knew that M. de Lagors's visitor was a woman; but his own conjectures, and the note which Madame Gipsy had sent to him at the cafe, had caused him to believe that this woman was Madame Fauvel.

"You must be mistaken," he said to Prosper.

"No, sir, no. Never could I mistake another for Madeleine. Ah! you who heard what she said to me yesterday, tell me: was I to have expected such infamous treason as this? You said to me then: 'She loves you, she loves you!' What do you think now? Speak!"

M. Verduret did not answer. He had been completely bewildered by his mistake, and was now racking his brain to discover the cause of it, which was soon discerned by his penetrating mind.

"This is the secret discovered by Nina," continued Prosper. "Madeleine, this pure and noble Madeleine, whom I believed to be as immaculate as an angel, is the mistress of this thief, who has even stolen the name he bears. And I, trusting fool that I was, made this scoundrel my best friend. I confided to him all my hopes and fears; and he was her lover! Of course they amused themselves by ridiculing my silly devotion and blind confidence!"

He stopped, overcome by his violent emotions. Wounded vanity is the worst of miseries. The certainty of having been so shamefully deceived and betrayed made Prosper almost insane with rage. "This is the last humiliation I shall submit

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to," he fiercely cried. "It shall not be said that I was coward enough to let an insult like this go unpunished."

He started toward the house; but M. Verduret seized his arm, and said:

"What are you going to do?"

"To have my revenge! I will break down the door; what do I care for the noise and scandal, now that I have nothing to lose? I shall not attempt to creep into the house like a thief, but as a master—as one who has a right to enter; as a man who, having received a deadly insult, comes to demand satisfaction."

"You will do nothing of the sort, Prosper."

"Who will prevent me?"

"I will!"

"You? Do not hope that you will be able to deter me. I will appear before them, put them to the blush, kill them both, and then put an end to my own wretched existence. That is what I intend to do, and nothing shall hinder me!"

If M. Verduret had not held Prosper with a vise-like grip, he would have escaped, and attempted to carry out his threat. "If you make any noise, Prosper, or raise an alarm, all your hopes are ruined," said M. Verduret.

"I have no hopes now."

"Raoul, put on his guard, will escape us, and you will remain dishonored forever."

"What is that to me?"

"It is everything to me. I have sworn to prove your innocence. A man of your age can easily find a wife, but can never restore lustre to a tarnished name. Let nothing interfere with the establishing of your innocence."

Genuine passion is uninfluenced by surrounding circumstances. M. Verduret and Prosper stood foot-deep in mud, wet to the skin, with the rain pouring down on their heads, and yet still continued their dispute. "I will be avenged," repeated Prosper, with the persistency of a fixed idea: "I will be avenged."

"Well, avenge yourself then like a man, and not like a child!" said M. Verduret angrily.

"Sir!"

"Yes, I repeat it, like a child. What will you do after you get into the house? Have you any arms? No. You rush upon Raoul, and a struggle ensues; and while you two are

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fighting, Madeleine jumps in the cab and drives off. What then? Which is the stronger, you or Raoul?"

Overcome by the sense of how powerless he was, Prosper remained silent.

"And of what use would arms be?" continued M. Verduret. "It would be the height of folly to shoot a man whom you can send to the galleys."

"What then shall I do?"

"Wait. Vengeance is a delicious fruit, which must be allowed to ripen in order that it may be fully enjoyed."

Prosper was unsettled in his resolution; M. Verduret, seeing this, advanced his last and strongest argument. "How do we know," said he, "that Mademoiselle Madeleine is here on her own account? Did we not come to the conclusion that she was sacrificing herself for the benefit of some one else? That superior will which compelled her to banish you may have constrained this step to-night."

Whatever coincides with our secret wishes is always eagerly welcomed, and this apparently improbable supposition struck Prosper as being possibly correct.

"That might be the case," he murmured, "who knows?"

"I would soon know," said M. Verduret, "if I could only see them together in that room."

"Will you promise me, sir, to tell me the truth, exactly what you yourself think, no matter how painful it may be for me?"

"I swear it, upon my word of honor."

At these words Prosper, with a strength which a few minutes before he would not have believed himself possessed of, raised the ladder, placed the last round on his shoulders, and said to M. Verduret:

"Mount!"

M. Verduret rapidly ascended the ladder, scarcely shaking it, and soon had his head on a level with the window. Prosper had seen but too well. There was Madeleine, at this hour of the night, alone with Raoul de Lagors in his bedchamber!

M. Verduret noticed that she still wore her bonnet and mantle. She was standing in the middle of the room, talking with great animation. Her look and gestures betrayed indignant scorn. There was an expression of ill-disguised loathing upon her beautiful face. Raoul was seated in a low chair by the fire, stirring up the embers with a pair of tongs. Every now and then he would shrug his shoulders, like a man resigned to

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everything he heard, and had no answer to make beyond: "I can not help it. I can do nothing for you."

M. Verduret would willingly have given the handsome ring on his finger to be able to hear what was being said; but the roaring wind completely drowned the voices of the speakers, and he dared not place his ear close to the window for fear of being perceived. "They are evidently quarreling," he thought; "but it is certainly not a lovers' quarrel."

Madeleine continued talking; and it was by closely watching Raoul's face, clearly revealed by the lamp on the chimney-piece, that M. Verduret hoped to discover the meaning of the scene before him. Now and again De Lagors would start and tremble in spite of his pretended indifference; or else he would strike at the fire with the tongs, as if giving vent to his rage at some reproach uttered by Madeleine. Finally, Madeleine changed her threats into entreaties, and, clasping her hands, almost fell on her knees. Raoul turned away his head, and refused to answer save in monosyllables.

Several times she was about to leave the room, but each time returned, as if asking a favor, and unable to make up her mind to quit the house till she had obtained it. At last she seemed to have uttered something decisive; for Raoul quickly rose and took from a desk near the fireplace a bundle of papers, which he handed to her.

"Well," thought M. Verduret, "this looks bad. Can it be a compromising correspondence which the young lady wants to secure!"

Madeleine took the papers, but was apparently still dissatisfied. She seemed to entreat Raoul to give her something else, but he refused; and she then threw the papers on the table. These papers puzzled M. Verduret very much, as he gazed at them through the window. "I am not blind," he said, "and I certainly am not mistaken; those red, green, and gray papers are evidently pawn tickets!"

Madeleine turned over the papers as if looking for some particular ones. She selected three, which she put in her pocket, disdainfully pushing the others aside. She was now evidently preparing to take her departure, and said a few words to Raoul, who took up the lamp as if to escort her downstairs.

There was nothing more for M. Verduret to see. He carefully descended the ladder, muttering to himself: "Pawn tickets! What infamous mystery lies at the bottom of all this?" The

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first thing to be done was to hide the ladder. Raoul might take it into his head to look round the garden, when he came to the door with Madeleine, and if he did so the ladder could scarcely fail to attract his attention. M. Verduret and Prosper hastily laid it on the ground, regardless of the shrubs which they destroyed in doing so, and then concealed themselves among the trees, whence they could watch at once the front door and the outer gate.

Madeleine and Raoul appeared in the doorway. Raoul placed the lamp on the floor, and offered his hand to the girl; but she refused it with haughty contempt, which somewhat soothed Prosper's lacerated heart. This scornful behavior did not, however, seem to surprise or hurt Raoul, who simply answered by an ironical gesture which implied, "As you please!" He followed Madeleine to the gate, which he opened and closed after her; then he hurried back to the house, while the cab drove rapidly away.

"Now," said Prosper, "you must tell me what you think. You promised to let me know the truth no matter how bitter it might be. Speak; I can bear it, be it what it may!"

"You will have only joy to bear, my friend. Within a month you will bitterly regret your suspicions of to-night. You will blush to think that you ever imagined Mademoiselle Madeleine to have been the mistress of a man like De Lagors."

"But, sir, appearances—"

"It is precisely against appearances that we must be on our guard. Always distrust them. A suspicion, false or just, is necessarily based on something. But we must not stay here forever; and as Raoul has fastened the gate, we shall have to climb over the wall."

"But there is the ladder."

"Let it stay where it is; as we can not efface our footprints, he will think thieves have been trying to get into the house." They scaled the wall, and had not walked fifty steps when they heard the noise of a gate being unlocked. They stood aside and waited; a man soon passed by on his way to the station.

"That is Raoul," said M. Verduret, "and Joseph will report to us that he has been to tell De Clameran what has just taken place. If they are only kind enough to speak French!" M. Verduret walked along quietly for some time, trying to connect the broken chain of his deductions. "Why the deuce," he

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abruptly asked, "did this Raoul, who is devoted to gay society, come to choose a lonely country house like this to live in?"

"I suppose it was because M. Fauvel's villa is only fifteen minutes' ride from here, on the banks of the Seine."

"That accounts for his staying here in the summer; but in winter?"

"Oh, in winter he has a room at the Hotel du Louvre, and all the year round keeps up an apartment in Paris."

This did not enlighten M. Verduret much; he hurried his pace. "I hope our driver has not gone," said he. "We can not take the train which is about to start, as Raoul would see us at the station."

Although it was more than an hour since M. Verduret and Prosper left the cab, where the road turned off, they found it waiting for them in front of the tavern.

The driver, being unable to resist the desire to change his bank-note, had ordered supper, and finding the wine very good, he was in no hurry to leave.

While delighted at the idea of having a fare back to Paris, he could not refrain from remarking on M. Verduret and Prosper's altered appearance. "Well, you are in a strange state!" he exclaimed.

Prosper replied that they had been to see a friend, and losing their way, had fallen into a quagmire; as if there were such things in Vesinet wood.

"So that's the way you got covered with mud, is it!" exclaimed the driver, who, though apparently contented with this explanation, strongly suspected that his two customers had been engaged in some nefarious transaction. This opinion seemed to be entertained by the people present, for they looked at Prosper's muddy clothes and then at each other in a knowing way.

But M. Verduret put an end to all further comment by saying: "Come on!"

"All right, your honor: get in while I settle my bill; I will be with you in a minute."

The drive back was silent and seemed interminably long. Prosper at first tried to draw his strange companion into conversation, but as he received nothing but monosyllables in reply, he held his peace for the rest of the journey. He was again beginning to feel irritated at the absolute empire exercised over him by this man. Physical discomfort was added

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to his other troubles. He was stiff and numb; every bone in him ached with the cold. Although mental endurance may be unlimited, bodily strength must in the end give way. A violent effort is always followed by reaction.

Lying back in a corner of the cab, with his feet upon the front seat, M. Verduret seemed to be enjoying a nap; yet he was never more wide awake. He was in a perplexed state of mind. This expedition, which he had been confident would solve all his doubts, had only added mystery to mystery. His chain of evidence, which he thought so strongly linked, was completely broken. For him the facts remained the same, but circumstances had changed. He could not imagine what common motive, what moral or material complicity, what influences, existed to cause the four actors in his drama, Madame Fauvel, Madeleine, Raoul, and De Clameran, to have apparently the same object in view. He was seeking, in his fertile mind, that encyclopedia of craft and subtlety, for some combination which would throw light on the problem before him.

Midnight struck as they reached the Grand Archangel, and for the first time M. Verduret remembered that he had not dined. Fortunately Madame Alexandre was still up, and in the twinkling of an eye had improvised a tempting supper. It was more than attention, more than respect, that she showed her guest. Prosper observed that she gazed admiringly at M. Verduret all the while that he was eating.

"You will not see me during the daytime to-morrow," said M. Verduret to Prosper, when he had risen to leave the room; "but I will be here about this time at night. Perhaps I shall discover what I am seeking at Jandidiers' ball."

Prosper was almost dumb with astonishment. What! would M. Verduret venture to appear at a fancy dress ball given by the wealthiest and most fashionable bankers in Paris? This accounted for his sending to the costumier. "Then you are invited to this ball?" he presently asked.

The expressive eyes of M. Verduret sparkled with amusement. "Not yet," he said; "but I shall be."

Oh, the inconsistency of the human mind! Prosper was tormented by the most serious reflections. He looked sadly round his chamber, and as he thought of M. Verduret's projected pleasure at the ball, exclaimed: "Ah, how fortunate he is! To-morrow he will see Madeleine more lovely than ever."

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XI

ABOUT the middle of the Rue St. Lazare are the almost regal residences of the brothers Jandidier, two celebrated financiers, who, if deprived of the prestige of immense wealth, would still be looked up to as remarkable men. Why can not the same be said of all men?

These two mansions, which were regarded as marvels of magnificence at the time they were built, are entirely distinct from each other, but so planned as to form a single building when this is desired. When the brothers Jandidier give grand parties, they have the movable partitions taken away, and thus obtain the most superb suite of drawing-rooms in Paris. Princely magnificence, lavish hospitality, and an elegant, graceful manner of receiving their guests, make the entertainments given by the brothers eagerly sought after by the fashionable circles of the capital. On the Saturday the Rue St. Lazare was blocked up by a file of carriages, whose fair occupants impatiently awaited their turn to alight. Dancing commenced at ten o'clock. The ball was a fancy dress one, and the majority of the costumes were superb; many were in the best taste, and some were quite original. Among the latter was that of a merry-andrew. Everything about the wearer was in perfect keeping: the insolent eye, coarse lips, inflamed cheek-bones, and a beard so red that it seemed to emit fire in the reflection of the dazzling lights.

He carried in his left hand a canvas banner, upon which were six or eight coarsely painted pictures, like those seen at country fairs. In his right he waved a little switch, with which he would every now and then strike his banner, after the fashion of a showman seeking to attract the attention of the crowd. A compact group gathered round him in the expectation of hearing some witty speeches; but he remained silent, near the door.

About half-past ten he quitted his post. M. and Madame Fauvel, followed by their niece Madeleine, had just entered.

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During the last ten days the affair of the Rue de Provence had been the general topic of conversation; and friends and enemies were alike glad to seize this opportunity of approaching the banker to tender their sympathy, or to offer equivocal condolence, which of all things is the most exasperating and insulting.

Belonging to the class of men of a serious turn, M. Fauvel had not assumed a fancy costume, but had merely thrown over his shoulders a short silk cloak. On his arm leaned Madame Fauvel, *née* Valentine de la Verberie, bowing and gracefully greeting her numerous friends.

She had once been remarkably beautiful; and to-night, in the artificial light, her very becoming dress seemed to have restored all her youthful freshness and comeliness. No one would have supposed her to be forty-eight years old. She wore a robe of embroidered satin and black velvet, of the later years of Louis XIV's reign, magnificent and severe, without the adornment of a single jewel. She looked superb and grand in her court dress and her powdered hair, as became a La Verberie, so some ill-natured people remarked, who had made the mistake of marrying a man of money.

Madeleine, too, on her part was the object of universal admiration, so dazzlingly beautiful and queen-like did she appear in her costume of maid of honor, which seemed to have been especially invented to set forth her beautiful figure. Her loveliness expanded in the perfumed atmosphere and dazzling light of the ballroom. Never had her hair looked so brilliant a black, her complexion so exquisite, or her large eyes so sparkling. Having greeted their hosts, Madeleine took her aunt's arm, while M. Fauvel wandered about in search of the card-tables, the usual refuge of bored men who find themselves enticed into a ballroom.

Dancing was now at its height. Two orchestras, led by Strauss and one of his lieutenants, filled the saloons with intoxicating sounds. The motley crowd whirled in the waltz, presenting a curious confusion of velvets, satins, laces, and diamonds. Almost every head and bosom sparkled with jewels; the palest cheeks became rosy; heavy eyes now shone like stars; and the glistening shoulders of fair women were like drifted snow in an April sun.

Forgotten by the crowd, the merry-andrew had taken refuge in the embrasure of a window, and seemed to be meditating

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upon the gay scene before him; at the same time he kept his eyes upon a couple not far distant. It was Madeleine, leaning on the arm of a gorgeously attired doge, that attracted his gaze, and the doge was the Marquis de Clameran, who appeared radiant, rejuvenated, and whose attentions to his partner had an air of triumph. At an interval in the quadrille, he leaned over her and whispered compliments of unbounded admiration; and she seemed to listen, if not with pleasure, at least without repugnance. She now and then smiled, and coquettishly shrugged her shoulders.

"Evidently," muttered the merry-andrew, "this noble scoundrel is paying court to the banker's niece; so I was right yesterday. But how can Mademoiselle Madeleine resign herself so graciously to his insipid flattery? Fortunately, Prosper is not here now."

He was interrupted by an elderly man wrapped in a Venetian mantle, who said to him: "You remember, M. Verduret"—this name was uttered half-seriously, half-banteringly—"what you promised me?"

The merry-andrew bowed with great respect, but not the slightest shade of humility. "I remember," he replied.

"But do not be imprudent, I beg you."

"Monsieur le Comte need not be uneasy; he has my promise."

"Very good. I know its value." The comte walked off; but during this short colloquy the quadrille had ended, and M. de Clameran and Madeleine were lost to sight.

"I shall find them near Madame Fauvel," thought the merry-andrew. And he at once started in search of the banker's wife.

Incommoded by the stifling heat of the room, Madame Fauvel had sought a little fresh air in the grand picture gallery, which, thanks to the talisman called gold, was now transformed into a fairy-like garden, filled with orange trees, japonicas, oleanders, and white lilacs, the delicate bunches of which hung in graceful clusters. The merry-andrew saw her seated near the door of the card-room. Upon her right was Madeleine, and on her left stood Raoul de Lagors, dressed in a costume of the time of Henry III.

"I must confess," muttered the merry-andrew from his post of observation, "that the young scamp is a handsome-looking fellow."

Madeleine appeared very sad. She had plucked a camellia from a plant near by, and was mechanically pulling it to pieces

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as she sat with her eyes cast down. Raoul and Madame Fauvel were engaged in earnest conversation. Their faces seemed composed, but the gestures of the one and the trembling of the other betrayed that a serious discussion was taking place between them. In the card-room sat the doge, M. de Clameran, so placed as to have a full view of Madame Fauvel and Madeleine, although he was himself concealed by an angle of the apartment.

"It is the continuation of yesterday's scene," thought the merry-andrew. "If I could only get behind those camellias, I might hear what they are saying." He pushed his way through the crowd, but just as he had reached the desired spot, Madeleine rose, and, taking the arm of a bejeweled Persian, walked away. At the same moment Raoul went into the card-room and whispered a few words to De Clameran.

"There they go," muttered the merry-andrew. "The pair of scoundrels certainly hold these poor women in their power; and it is in vain that they struggle to free themselves. What can be the secret of their influence?"

Suddenly a great commotion was caused in the picture gallery by the announcement of a wonderful minuet to be danced in the grand saloon; then by the arrival of the Comtesse de Commarin as Aurora; and finally, by the presence of the Princess Korasoff, with her superb suite of emeralds, reported to be the finest in the world. In an instant the gallery became almost deserted.

Only a few forlorn-looking people remained; mostly sulky husbands, whose wives were dancing with partners they were jealous of, and some melancholy youths, looking awkward and unhappy in their gay fancy dresses. The merry-andrew thought the opportunity favorable for carrying out his designs. He abruptly left his corner, brandishing his banner, and tapping upon it with his switch, hammering affectedly all the time, as though about to speak. Having crossed the gallery, he placed himself between the chair occupied by Madame Fauvel and the door. As soon as the people left in the gallery had collected in a circle round him, he struck a comical attitude, and in a tone of great buffoonery proceeded to address them as follows:

"Ladies and gentlemen, this morning I obtained a license from the authorities of this city. And for what? Why, gentlemen, for the purpose of exhibiting to you a spectacle which

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has already excited the admiration of the four quarters of the globe, and of several other academies. Inside this booth, ladies, is about to commence the representation of a most unheard-of drama, acted for the first time at Pekin, and translated by our most famous authors. Gentlemen, you can take your seats at once; the lamps are lighted, and the actors are dressing."

Here he stopped speaking, and imitated to perfection the screeching sounds which mountebanks educe from their musical instruments. "Now, ladies and gentlemen," he resumed, "you will wish to know what I am doing here if the piece is to be performed inside the booth. The fact is, gentlemen, that I intend to give you a foretaste of the agitations, sensations, emotions, palpitations, and other entertainments which you may enjoy for the small sum of ten sous. You see this superb picture? Well, it represents the eight most thrilling scenes in the drama. Ah, you begin to shudder already; and yet this is nothing compared to the play itself. This splendid picture gives you no more idea of the actual performance than a drop of water gives an idea of the sea, or a spark of fire of the sun. My picture, gentlemen, is merely a foretaste of what takes place inside, like the odors which emanate from the kitchen of a restaurant."

"Do you know the fellow?" asked an enormous Turk of a melancholy Punch.

"No, but he imitates a trumpet splendidly."

"Oh, very well indeed! But what is he driving at?"

He was endeavoring to attract the attention of Madame Fauvel, who, since Raoul and Madeleine had left her, had abandoned herself to a mournful reverie. He succeeded in his object. His shrill voice brought the banker's wife back to a sense of reality; she started and looked quickly about her, as if suddenly awakened; then she turned toward the merry-andrew.

He, however, continued: "Now, ladies, we are in China. The first of the eight pictures on my canvas, here, in the left hand corner,"—here he touched the top daub,—"represents the celebrated Mandarin Li-Fô, in the bosom of his family. The pretty young lady leaning over him is his wife; and the children playing on the carpet are the bonds of love between this happy pair. Do you not inhale the odor of contentment and happiness emanating from this admirable picture, gentlemen? Madame Li-Fô is the most virtuous of women, adoring her husband and idolizing her children. Being virtuous she is happy,

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or as the wise Confucius says, 'The ways of virtue are more pleasant than the ways of vice.' "

Madame Fauvel had quitted her seat, and taken another nearer to the speaker.

"Do you see anything on the banner like what he has been describing?" asked the melancholy Punch of his neighbor.

"No, nothing. Do you?"

The fact is, that the daubs of paint on the canvas represented nothing in particular, so that the merry-andrew could pretend they were anything he pleased.

"Picture No. 2!" he cried, after a flourish of music. "This old lady, seated before a mirror tearing out her hair—especially the gray ones—you have seen before; do you recognize her? No, you do not. Well, she is the fair mandarine of the first picture. I see the tears in your eyes, ladies and gentlemen. Ah, you have cause to weep; for she is no longer virtuous, and her happiness has departed with her virtue. Alas, it is a sad tale! One fatal day she met in a street of Pekin a young ruffian, fiendish, but beautiful as an angel, and she loves him—the wretched woman loves him!"

The last words were uttered in the most tragic tone as he raised his clasped hands to heaven. During this tirade he had turned slightly round, so that he now found himself facing the banker's wife, whose countenance he closely watched while he was speaking.

"You are surprised, gentlemen," he continued; "I am not. The great Bilboquet, my master, has proved to us that the heart never grows old, and that the most vigorous wall-flowers flourish on the oldest ruins. This unhappy woman is nearly fifty years old—fifty years old, and in love with a youth! Hence this heartrending scene which should serve as a warning to us all."

"Really!" grumbled a cook dressed in white satin, who had passed the evening distributing bills of fare, which no one read; "I thought he would be more amusing."

"But," continued the merry-andrew, "you must go inside the booth to witness the effects of the mandarine's folly. At times a ray of reason penetrates her diseased brain, and then the sight of her anguish would soften a heart of stone. Enter, and for the small sum of ten sous you shall hear sobs such as the Odeon Theatre never echoed in its halcyon days. The unhappy woman has waked up to the absurdity and inanity of

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her blind passion; she confesses to herself that she is madly pursuing a fantom. She knows but too well that he, in the vigor and beauty of youth, can not love a faded old woman like herself, who vainly endeavors to retain the last traces of her once entrancing beauty. She feels that the sweet words he once whispered in her charmed ear were deceitful falsehoods. She knows that the day is near when she will be left alone, with nothing save his mantle in her hand."

As the merry-andrew addressed this voluble harangue to the crowd around him, he narrowly watched the countenance of the banker's wife. But nothing he had said seemed to affect her. She leaned back in her armchair, perfectly calm, with the accustomed brightness in her eyes and an occasional smile upon her lips.

"Good heavens!" muttered the merry-andrew uneasily, "can I be on the wrong track?" Preoccupied, however, as he was, he observed an addition to his circle of listeners in the person of M. de Clameran. "The third picture," said he, after imitating a roll of drums, "depicts the old mandarine after she has dismissed that most annoying of guests—remorse—from her bosom. She promises herself that interest will supply the place of love in chaining the too seductive youth to her side. It is with this object that she invests him with false honors and dignity, and introduces him to the chief mandarins of the capital of the Celestial Empire; then, since so handsome a youth must cut a fine figure in society, and as a fine figure can not be cut without money, the lady sacrifices all she possesses for his sake. Necklaces, rings, bracelets, diamonds, and pearls, are all surrendered. The monster carries all these jewels to the pawnbrokers in the Tien-Tsi Street, and then has the cruelty to refuse her the tickets, by means of which she might redeem her treasures."

The merry-andrew thought that he had at last hit the mark. Madame Fauvel began to betray signs of agitation. Once she made an attempt to rise from her seat and to retire, but it seemed as if her strength failed her, and she sank back, forced to listen to the end.

"Finally, ladies and gentlemen," continued the merry-andrew, "the richly filled jewel-cases became empty. The day arrived when the mandarine had nothing more to give. It was then that the young scoundrel conceived the project of carrying off the jasper button belonging to the mandarin Li-Fô—a splendid

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jewel of incalculable value, which, being the badge of his dignity, was kept in a granite stronghold, and guarded by three soldiers night and day. Ah! the mandarine resisted for a long time! She knew the innocent soldiers would be accused and crucified, as is the custom in Pekin, and this thought restrained her. But her lover besought her so tenderly that she finally yielded to his entreaties; and—the jasper button was stolen. The fourth picture represents the guilty couple stealthily creeping down the private staircase: see their frightened looks—see—"

The merry-andrew abruptly stopped. Three or four of his auditors rushed to the assistance of Madame Fauvel, who seemed about to faint; and at the same moment he felt his arm roughly seized by some one behind him. He turned round and found himself face to face with M. de Clameran and Raoul de Lagors, both of whom were pale with anger.

"What do you require, gentlemen?" he asked politely.

"To speak with you," they answered in a breath.

"I am at your service." And he followed them to the end of the picture gallery, near a window opening on to a balcony. Here they were unobserved except by the man in the Venetian cloak, whom the merry-andrew had so respectfully addressed as "Monsieur le Comte." The minuet having ended, the musicians were resting, and the crowd began rapidly to fill the gallery. Madame Fauvel's sudden faintness had passed off unnoticed save by a few, who attributed it to the heat of the room. M. Fauvel had been sent for; but when he came hurrying in, and found his wife composedly talking to Madeleine, his alarm was dissipated, and he returned to the card-tables.

Not having as much control over his temper as Raoul, M. de Clameran angrily remarked to the merry-andrew: "In the first place, sir, I should like to know whom I am speaking to."

The merry-andrew, determined to answer as if he thought the question were a jest, replied in the bantering tone of a buffoon: "You want my passport, do you, my lord doge? I left it in the hands of the city authorities; it contains my name, age, profession, domicile, and every detail."

With an angry gesture, M. de Clameran interrupted him. "You have just committed a most vile action!"

"I, my lord doge?"

"Yes, you! What is the meaning of the abominable story you have been relating?"

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"Abominable! You may say so, if you like; but I, who composed it, entertain a different opinion."

"Enough, sir; you might at least have the courage to acknowledge that your allusions conveyed a vile insinuation against Madame Fauvel."

The merry-andrew stood with his head thrown back, and mouth wide open, as if astounded at what he heard. But any one who knew him would have detected his bright black eyes sparkling with malicious satisfaction.

"Bless my heart!" he cried, as if speaking to himself. "This is the strangest thing I ever heard of! How can my drama of the Mandarine Li-Fo have any reference to Madame Fauvel, whom I don't know from Adam or Eve? I can't think how the resemblance—unless—but no, that is impossible."

"Do you pretend," said M. de Clameran, "to be ignorant of M. Fauvel's misfortune?"

The merry-andrew looked very innocent, and asked: "A misfortune?"

"I mean the robbery of which M. Fauvel is the victim. It is in every one's mouth, and you must have heard of it."

"Ah, yes, yes; I remember. His cashier has run off with three hundred and fifty thousand francs. Gracious me! It is a thing that almost happens daily. But, as to discovering any connection between this robbery and my story, that is quite another matter."

M. de Clameran did not hasten to reply. A nudge from De Lagors had calmed him as if by enchantment. He looked suspiciously at the mountebank, and seemed to regret having uttered the significant words forced from him by angry excitement. "Very well," he finally said in his usual haughty tone: "I must have been mistaken. I accept your explanation."

But the merry-andrew, hitherto so humble and foolish-looking, seemed to take offense at the last word, and, assuming a defiant attitude, exclaimed: "I have not given, nor had I to give, any explanation."

"Sir!" began De Clameran.

"Allow me to finish, if you please. If, unintentionally, I have offended the wife of a man whom I highly esteem, it is, I fancy, his business to seek redress, and not yours. Perhaps you will tell me he is too old to demand satisfaction, very likely; but he has sons, and I have just seen one of them here. You ask who I am; in return I ask you who are you—you who under-

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take to act as Madame Fauvel's champion? Are you her relative, friend, or ally? What right have you to insult her by pretending to discover an allusion to her in a story invented for amusement?"

There was nothing to be said in reply to this. M. de Clameran sought a means of evading a complete answer. "I am a friend of M. Fauvel's," he said, "and this title gives me the right to be as jealous of his reputation as if it were my own. If you do not think this a sufficient reason for my interference, I must inform you that his family will shortly be mine."

"Ah!"

"Next week, sir, my marriage with Mademoiselle Madeleine will be publicly announced."

This news was so unexpected, so strange, that for a moment the merry-andrew was fairly astounded. But he soon recovered himself, and, bowing with deference, said, with covert irony: "Permit me to offer you my congratulations, sir. Besides being the belle of to-night's ball, Mademoiselle Madeleine is worth, I hear, half a million."

Raoul de Lagors had anxiously been watching the people near them, to see if they overheard this conversation. "We have had enough of this gossip," he said in a disdainful tone; "I will only say one thing to you, my fine fellow, and that is, your tongue is too long."

"Perhaps it is, my pretty youth, perhaps it is; but my arm is still longer."

De Clameran here interrupted them by exclaiming: "It is impossible to have an explanation with a man who conceals his identity under the guise of a fool."

"You are at liberty, my lord doge, to ask the master of the house who I am—if you dare."

"You are," cried Clameran, "you are—" A warning look from Raoul checked the noble iron-founder from using an epithet which might have led to an affray, or at least a scandalous scene.

The merry-andrew stood by with a sardonic smile, and, after a moment's silence, stared M. de Clameran steadily in the face, and, in measured tones, said: "I was the best friend, sir, that your dead brother Gaston ever had. I was his adviser, and the confidant of his last hopes."

These words came like a clap of thunder on De Clameran, who turned deadly pale, and started back with his hands

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stretched out before him, as if shrinking from a fantom. He tried to answer, to protest, to say something, but terror froze the words upon his tongue.

"Come, let us go," said De Lagors, who had remained perfectly self-possessed. And he dragged De Clameran away, half supporting him, for he staggered like a drunken man, and clung to every object he passed, to prevent himself from falling.

"Oh, oh, oh!" exclaimed the merry-andrew, in three different tones. He was almost as much astonished as the forge-master, and remained rooted to the spot, watching the latter as he slowly left the room. It was with no decided object in view that the merry-andrew had ventured to use the last mysteriously threatening words, but he had been inspired to do so by his wonderful instinct, which with him was like the scent of a bloodhound. "What can this mean?" he murmured. "Why was he so frightened? What terrible memory have I awakened in his base soul? I need not boast of my penetration, or the subtlety of my plans. There is a great master, who, without any effort, in an instant destroys all our chimeras; he is called 'Chance.'"

His mind had wandered far from the present scene, when he was brought back to his situation by some one touching him on the shoulder. It was the man in the Venetian cloak. "Are you satisfied, M. Verduret?" he inquired.

"Yes and no, Monsieur the Comte. No, because I have not completely achieved the object I had in view when I asked you to obtain an invitation for me here to-night; yes, because these two rascals behaved in a manner which dispels all doubt."

"And yet you complain—"

"I do not complain, sir; on the contrary, I bless chance, or rather Providence, which has just revealed to me the existence of a secret that I did not before even suspect."

Five or six people approached the comte, and he went off with them after giving M. Verduret a friendly nod. The latter instantly threw aside his banner, and started in pursuit of Madame Fauvel. He found her sitting on a sofa, in the ball-room, engaged in an animated conversation with Madeleine. "Of course they are talking over the scene; but what has become of De Lagors and De Clameran?" thought he. He soon caught sight of them wandering among the groups scattered about the room, and eagerly asking questions. "I will

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bet my head," he muttered, "these honorable gentlemen are trying to find out who I am. Ask away, my friends, ask away!"

They soon gave over their inquiries, but were so preoccupied, and anxious to be alone in order to reflect and deliberate, that, without waiting for the supper, they took leave of Madame Fauvel and her niece, saying they were going home. The merry-andrew saw them enter the cloak-room to fetch their cloaks; and in a few minutes they left the house. "I have nothing more to do here," he murmured; "I may as well go too."

Completely covering his dress with an ample overcoat, he started for home, thinking the cold frosty air would cool his confused brain. He lit a cigar and, walking up the Rue St. Lazare, crossed the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette, and struck into the Faubourg Montmartre. A man suddenly darted out from some place of concealment, and rushed upon him with a dagger. Fortunately the merry-andrew had a cat-like instinct, which enabled him to protect himself against immediate danger, and detect any harm which threatened. He saw, or rather divined, the man crouching in the dark shadow of a house, and had the presence of mind to step back and spread out his arms before him, and so ward off the would-be assassin. This movement certainly saved his life, for he received in the arm a furious stab, which would have instantly killed him had it penetrated his breast. Anger, more than pain, made him exclaim: "Ah, you villain!" and recoiling a few feet, he put himself on the defensive. The precaution, however, was useless; for seeing his blow miss the mark, the assassin did not return to the attack, but made rapidly off.

"That was certainly De Lagors," thought the merry-andrew, "and De Clameran must be somewhere near. While I walked round one side of the church, they must have gone the other and lain in wait for me."

His wound began to pain him very much, and he stood under a gas-lamp to examine it. It did not appear to be dangerous, although the arm was cut through to the bone. He tore his handkerchief into four bands, and tied his arm up with them with the dexterity of a surgeon. "I must be on the track of some great crime," said he, "since these fellows are resolved upon murder. When such cunning rogues are only in danger of the police court, they do not gratuitously risk the chance of being tried for murder." He thought that by enduring a great deal of pain he might still use his arm, so he started in pursuit of his

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enemy, taking care to keep in the middle of the road, and to avoid all dark corners. Although he saw no one, he was convinced that he was being followed. He was not mistaken. When he reached the Boulevard Montmartre, he crossed the street, and, as he did so, distinguished two shadows which he recognized. They also crossed the street a little higher up.

"I have to deal with desperate men," he muttered. "They do not even take the pains to conceal their pursuit of me. They seem to be accustomed to this kind of adventure, and the carriage trick which fooled Fanferlot would never succeed with them. Besides, my light hat is a perfect beacon to lead them on in the night." He continued his way up the boulevard, and, without turning his head, felt sure that his enemies were not more than thirty paces behind him. "I must get rid of them somehow," he said to himself. "I can neither return home nor to the Grand Archangel with these devils at my heels. They are following me now to find out where I live, and who I am. If they discover the merry-andrew is M. Verduret, and that M. Verduret is M. Lecoq, my plans will be ruined. They will escape abroad with the money, and I shall be left to console myself with a wounded arm. A pleasant ending to all my exertions!"

The idea of Raoul and De Clameran escaping him so exasperated him that for an instant he thought of having them arrested at once. This was easy enough, for he only had to rush upon them, shout for help, and they would all three be arrested, conducted to the police station and brought before the commissary. The police often resort to this ingenious and simple means to arrest a criminal whom they may meet by chance, and whom they can not seize without a warrant. The merry-andrew had sufficient proof to sustain him in the arrest of De Lagors. He could produce the letter and the mutilated prayer-book, he could reveal the existence of the pawnbroker's tickets in the house at Vésinet, he could show his wounded arm. He could, if necessary, force Raoul to confess how and why he had assumed the name of De Lagors, and what his motive was in passing himself off as a relative of M. Fauvel. On the other hand, in acting thus hastily, he would be, perhaps, insuring the safety of the principal plotter, De Clameran. What absolute proofs had he against him? Not one. He had strong suspicions, but no real grounds for making any charge. On reflection, the detective decided that he would act alone, as

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he had thus far done, and that alone and unaided he would discover the truth of his suspicions.

Having arrived at this decision, the first step to be taken was to put his pursuers on the wrong scent. He walked rapidly along the Boulevard Sébastopol, and, reaching the square of the Arts et Métiers, he abruptly stopped, and asked some insignificant questions of two policemen, who were standing talking together. This maneuvre had the result he expected; Raoul and De Clameran stood perfectly still about twenty steps off, not daring to advance. While talking with the constables, the merry-andrew pulled the bell of the door before which they were standing, and the sound that ensued apprised him that the door was open. He bowed, and entered the house.

A minute later the constables had passed on, and De Lagors and De Clameran in their turn rang the bell. When the door was opened, they roused up the concierge and asked who it was that had just gone in disguised as a merry-andrew. They were told that he had seen no such person, and that none of the lodgers had gone out in fancy costume that night. "However," added the man, "I am not perfectly sure, for this house has another door which opens on the Rue St. Denis."

"We are tricked," interrupted De Lagors, "and will never know who this merry-andrew is."

"Unless we learn it too soon for our own advantage," said De Clameran musingly.

While the pair were lamenting their failure in discovering the merry-andrew's identity, Verduret hurried along and reached the Grand Archangel as the clock struck three. Prosper, who was watching from his window, saw him in the distance, and ran down to open the door for him. "What have you learned?" he asked: "What did you find out? Did you see Madeleine? Were Raoul and De Clameran at the ball?"

But M. Verduret was not in the habit of discussing private affairs where he might be overheard. "First of all, let us go into your room," said he, "and then get me some water to wash this cut, which burns like fire."

"Heavens! Are you wounded?"

"Yes, it is a little souvenir of your friend Raoul. Ah, I will soon teach him the danger of scratching my skin!" Prosper was surprised at the look of merciless rage on his friend's face, as he calmly washed and dressed his arm. "Now, Prosper, we will talk as much as you please," resumed M. Verduret. "Our

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enemies are on the alert, and we must crush them instantly. I have made a mistake. I have been on the wrong track; it is an accident liable to happen to any man, no matter how intelligent he may be. I took the effect for the cause. The day I was convinced that culpable relations existed between Raoul and Madame Fauvel, I thought I held the end of the thread that would lead us to the truth. I ought to have been more mistrustful; this solution was too simple, too natural."

"Do you suppose Madame Fauvel to be innocent?"

"Certainly not; but her guilt is not such as I first supposed. I imagined that, infatuated with a seductive young adventurer, Madame Fauvel had bestowed upon him the name of one of her relatives, and then introduced him to her husband as her nephew. This was an adroit stratagem to gain him admission to the house. She began by giving him all the money she could dispose of; then she let him have her jewels to pawn; and at length having nothing more to give, she allowed him to steal the money from her husband's safe. That is what I first thought."

"And in this way everything was explained?"

"No, this did not explain everything, as I well knew at the time, and should, consequently, have studied my characters more thoroughly. How is De Clameran's ascendency to be accounted for, if my first idea was the correct one?"

"De Clameran is De Lagors's accomplice, of course."

"Ah, there is the mistake! I for a long time believed De Lagors to be the person principally concerned, whereas, in fact, he is nothing. Yesterday, in a dispute between them, the forge-master said to him: 'And, above all, my young friend, I would advise you not to resist me, for if you do I will crush you to atoms.' That explains all. The elegant De Lagors is not Madame Fauvel's lover, but De Clameran's tool. Besides, did our first suppositions account for Madeleine's resigned obedience? It is De Clameran, and not De Lagors, whom she obeys."

Prosper began to remonstrate. M. Verduret shrugged his shoulders. To convince him he had only to tell him that three hours ago De Clameran had announced his approaching marriage with Madeleine; but he refrained from doing so. "De Clameran," he continued, "De Clameran alone has Madame Fauvel in his power. Now, the question is, what is the secret of this terrible influence he has gained over her? I have posi-

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tive proof that they have not met since their early youth until fifteen months ago; and, as Madame Fauvel's reputation has always been above the reach of slander, we must seek in the past for the cause of her resigned obedience to his will."

"We shall never discover it," said Prosper mournfully.

"We shall know it as soon as we have learned the history of De Clameran's past life. Ah, to-night he turned as white as a sheet when I mentioned his brother Gaston's name. And then I remembered that Gaston died suddenly, while his brother Louis was on a visit to him."

"Do you think he was murdered?"

"I think the men who tried to assassinate me would do anything. The robbery, my friend, has now become a secondary affair. It is easily explained, and, if that were all that had to be accounted for, I would say to you: 'My task is done, let us go and ask the investigating magistrate for a warrant of arrest.'"

Prosper started up with sparkling eyes, and exclaimed: "What, you know then—is it possible?"

"Yes, I know who gave the key, and I know who told the secret word."

"The key may have been M. Fauvel's. But the word—"

"The word, unlucky man, you gave yourself. You have forgotten, I suppose. But, fortunately, Nina remembered. You know that a couple of days before the robbery, you took De Lagors and two other friends to sup with Madame Gipsy? Nina was sad, and reproached you for not being more devoted to her."

"Yes, I remember that."

"But do you remember what you replied to her?"

"No, I do not," said Prosper, after thinking a moment.

"Well, I will tell you; you said: 'Nina, you are unjust in reproaching me with not thinking constantly of you, for at this very moment it is your dear name that guards my employer's safe.'"

The truth suddenly burst upon Prosper like a thunderclap. He wrung his hands despairingly and exclaimed: "Yes, oh, yes! I remember now."

"Then you can easily understand the rest. One of the scoundrels went to Madame Fauvel, and compelled her to give up her husband's key; then, at a venture, he placed the movable buttons on the name of Gipsy, opened the safe, and took from

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it the three hundred and fifty thousand francs. And Madame Fauvel must have been terribly frightened before she yielded. The day after the robbery the poor woman was near dying; and it was she who at the greatest risk sent you the ten thousand francs."

"But who was the thief, Raoul or De Clameran? What enables them to thus tyrannize over Madame Fauvel? And how does Madeleine come to be mixed up in this disgraceful affair?"

"These questions, my dear Prosper, I can not yet answer; therefore I postpone going to see the magistrate. I must ask you to wait ten days; and, if in that time I can not discover the solution of this mystery, I will return and we will go together to M. Patrigent."

"Are you then going away?"

"In an hour I shall be on the road to Beaucaire. It was from that neighborhood that De Clameran came, as well as Madame Fauvel, who was a Mademoiselle de la Verberie before her marriage."

"Yes, I have heard of both families."

"I must go there to study them. Neither Raoul nor De Clameran can escape during my absence. The police will not lose sight of them. But you, Prosper, must be prudent. Promise me to remain a prisoner here while I am away."

All that M. Verduret asked, Prosper willingly promised. But he could not let him depart thus. "Will you not tell me, sir," he asked, "who you are, and your reasons for coming to my assistance?"

M. Verduret smiled sadly, and replied: "I will tell you in the presence of Nina, on the day before your marriage with Madeleine takes place."

Once left to his own reflection, Prosper began to appreciate the powerful assistance rendered him by his friend. Recalling the field of investigation gone over by his mysterious acquaintance, he was amazed at its extent. How many facts had been discovered in a week, and with what precision, too, although he had stated he was on the wrong track! Verduret had grouped his evidence, and reached a result which Prosper felt he never could have hoped to have attained by his own exertions. He was conscious that he possessed neither M. Verduret's penetration nor his subtlety, still less the art of exacting obedience, of creating friends at every step, and of making men and circumstances conduce to the attainment of a common

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result. He soon began to regret the absence of this friend, who had risen up in the hour of adversity. He missed the sometimes rough but always kindly voice, which had encouraged and consoled him. He felt wofully lost and helpless, not daring to act or think for himself, more timid than a child when deserted by its nurse. He had at least the good sense to follow the recommendations of his mentor. He remained shut up at the Grand Archangel, not even showing himself at the windows. Twice he had news of M. Verduret. The first time he received a letter in which this friend said he had seen his father, and had a long talk with him. Afterward, Dubois, M. de Clameran's valet, came to tell him that his "chïef" reported everything as progressing finely. On the ninth day of his voluntary seclusion, Prosper began to feel restless, and at ten o'clock at night wished to go for a walk, thinking the fresh air would relieve the headache which had kept him awake the previous night. Madame Alexandre, who seemed to have some knowledge of M. Verduret's affairs, begged Prosper to remain at home.

"What do I risk by taking a walk at this hour, in a quiet part of the city?" he asked. "I can certainly stroll as far as the Jardin des Plantes without the chance of meeting any one."

Unfortunately he did not strictly follow this programme; for, having reached the Orleans railway station, he went into a cafe near by, and called for a glass of beer. As he sat drinking it, he glanced at a daily paper, "Le Soleil," and under the heading of "Rumors of the Day," read the following paragraph: "We understand that the niece of one of our most prominent bankers, M. Andre Fauvel, will be shortly married to the Marquis Louis de Clameran, a Provencal nobleman." This news, coming upon him so unexpectedly, proved to Prosper the justness of M. Verduret's calculations. Alas! why did not this certainty inspire him with absolute faith? Why did it not give him the courage to wait, the strength of mind to refrain from acting on his own responsibility? Frenzied by distress of mind, he already saw Madeleine indissolubly united to this villain, and, thinking that M. Verduret would perhaps arrive too late to be of use, determined at all risks to throw an obstacle in the way of the marriage. He called for pen and paper, and, forgetting that no situation can excuse the mean cowardice of an anonymous letter, wrote in a disguised hand the following lines to M. Fauvel:

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"DEAR SIR—You consigned your cashier to prison; you acted rightly, since you were convinced of his dishonesty and faithlessness. But, even if he stole three hundred and fifty thousand francs from your safe, does it follow that he also stole Madame Fauvel's diamonds, and took them to the pawnbroker's, where they now are? Warned as you are, were I you, I would not be the subject of public scandal, but I would watch my wife, and would soon discover that one should ever be distrustful of handsome cousins. Moreover, before signing Mademoiselle Madeleine's marriage contract, I would call at the Prefecture of Police, and obtain some information concerning the noble Marquis de Clameran.—A FRIEND."

Prosper hastened off to post his letter. Fearing that it would not reach M. Fauvel in time, he walked to one of the head offices in the Rue Cardinal Lemoine, and put it into the letter-box. Until this moment he had not doubted the propriety of his action. But now, when too late, when he heard the sound of his letter falling into the box, a thousand scruples filled his mind. Was it not wrong to act thus hurriedly? Would not this letter interfere with all M. Verduret's plans? Upon reaching the hotel, his doubts were changed into bitter regrets. Joseph Dubois was waiting for him; he had received a telegram from his chief saying that his business was finished, and that he would return the next evening at nine o'clock. Prosper was wretched. He would have given all he had to recover the anonymous letter. And he had cause for regret. For at that very hour M. Verduret was taking his seat in the train at Tarascon, and meditating upon the most advantageous plan to be adopted in pursuance of his discoveries. For he had discovered everything.

Adding to what he already knew the story of an old servant of Mademoiselle de la Verberie, the affidavit of an old footman who had always lived in the De Clameran family, and the depositions of the married couple in the service of De Lagors at his Vesinet country-house, the latter having been sent to him by Dubois (Fanferlot), with a good deal of information obtained from the Prefecture of Police, he had worked up a complete case, and could now act upon a chain of evidence without a missing link. As he had predicted, he had been compelled to search into the distant past for the first causes of the crime of which Prosper had been the victim. The following is the

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drama, as written out by him for the benefit of the examining magistrate with the certainty that it contained sufficient grounds for preferring an indictment.

XII

ABOUT six miles from Tarascon, on the left bank of the Rhone, not far from Messrs. Audibert's wonderful gardens, stood the chateau of Clameran, a weather-stained, neglected, but massive structure. Here lived, in 1841, the old Marquis de Clameran and his two sons, Gaston and Louis. The marquis was an eccentric old man. He belonged to the race of nobles, now almost extinct, whose watches stopped in 1789, and who keep the time of a past century. More attached to his illusions than to his life, the old marquis insisted upon considering all the stirring events which had happened since the first revolution as a series of deplorable practical jokes. Emigrating in the suite of the Comte d'Artois, he did not return to France until 1815, with the allies. He should have been thankful to heaven for the recovery of a portion of his immense family estates; a comparatively small portion, it is true, but still sufficient to support him honorably. He said, however, that he did not think the few paltry acres worth thanking heaven for. At first he tried every means to obtain an appointment at court; but, finding all his efforts fail, he resolved to retire to his chateau, which he did, after cursing and pitying his king, whom he worshiped, and whom, at the bottom of his heart, he regarded as a thorough Jacobin.

The Marquis de Clameran soon became accustomed to the free and indolent life of a country nobleman. Possessing about fifteen thousand francs a year, he spent twenty-five or thirty thousand, borrowing even on his estates, on the pretense that a genuine Restoration would soon take place, and that he would then regain possession of all his properties. Following his example, his younger son, Louis, lived extravagantly, and was always in pursuit of adventure, or idling away his time in drinking and gambling. The elder son, Gaston, anxious to par-

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ticipate in the stirring events of the time, studied hard, and read certain papers and pamphlets surreptitiously received, the mere titles of which were regarded by his father as blasphemous. Altogether the old marquis was the happiest of mortals, eating and drinking well, hunting a good deal, tolerated by the peasants, and execrated by the neighboring townspeople, whom he treated with contempt and raillery. Time never hung heavy on his hands, excepting in the summer, when the valley of the Rhone was intensely hot; but even then he had infallible means of amusement ever fresh, though always the same. It was to speak ill of his daughter, the Comtesse de la Verberie.

The Comtesse de la Verberie, the marquis's special aversion, was a tall, wiry woman, angular in character, as well as in appearance, cold and arrogant toward her equals, and domineering over her inferiors. Like her noble neighbor, she had emigrated with her husband, who was afterward killed at Lutzen, but, unfortunately for his memory, not in the French ranks. In 1815 the comtesse also came back to France. But while the Marquis de Clameran returned to comparative ease, she could obtain nothing from royal munificence but the small estate and chateau of La Verberie, and a pension of two thousand five hundred francs. The comtesse had but one child, a lovely girl of eighteen, named Valentine, fair, slender, and graceful, with large, soft eyes, beautiful enough to make the stone saints of the village church thrill in their niches when she knelt piously at their feet. The renown of her great beauty, carried along on the rapid waters of the Rhone, had spread far and wide. Often the boatmen and the robust drivers urging their powerful horses along the towpath would stop to gaze with admiration upon Valentine, seated under some grand old trees on the bank of the river, absorbed in a book. At a distance, in her white dress and flowing tresses, she seemed to these honest people a mysterious spirit from another world, and they regarded it as a good omen when they caught a glimpse of her. All along between Arles and Valence she was spoken of as the "lovely fairy" of La Verberie.

If M. de Clameran detested the comtesse, Madame de la Verberie execrated the marquis. If he nicknamed her "the witch," she retaliated by calling him "the old gander." And yet they ought to have agreed, for at heart they cherished the same opinions, though viewing them in different ways. The marquis considered himself a philosopher, scoffed at every-

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thing, and had an excellent digestion. The comtesse nursed her old grievances, and grew sallow and thin from rage and envy. Still, they might have spent many pleasant evenings together, for, after all, they were neighbors. From Clameran could be seen Valentine's greyhound running about the park of La Verberie; from La Verberie glimpses were had of the lights in the dining-room windows of Clameran. And, regularly as these lights were discerned every evening, the comtesse would say in a spiteful tone: "Ah, now their orgies are about to commence!" The two chateaux were only separated by the fast-flowing Rhone, which at this spot was rather narrow. But between the two families existed a hatred deeper and more difficult to avert than even the river's course. What was the cause of this hatred? The comtesse, no less than the marquis, would have found it difficult to tell. It was related that under the reign of Henri IV, or Louis XIII, a La Verberie had seduced a fair daughter of the De Clamerans. The misdeed in question led to a duel; swords flashed in the sunlight, and blood stained the fresh green grass. This groundwork of facts had been highly embellished by fiction; handed down from generation to generation, it became a long tragic history of perfidy, murder, and rapine, precluding any intercourse between the two families.

The usual result followed, as it always does in real life, and often in romances, which, however exaggerated they may be, generally preserve a reflection of the truth which inspires them. Gaston met Valentine at an entertainment, and fell in love with her at first sight. Valentine saw Gaston, and from that moment his image filled her heart. But so many obstacles separated them! For more than a year they both religiously guarded their secret, buried like a treasure in the inmost recesses of their hearts. This year of charming, dangerous reveries decided their fate. To the sweetness of their first impressions a more tender sentiment succeeded; then came love, each of them endowing the other with superhuman qualities and ideal perfections. Deep, sincere passion expands only in solitude; in the impure air of a city it fades and dies, like the hardy plants of the south, which lose their color and perfume when transplanted into our hot-houses. Gaston and Valentine had only seen each other once, but seeing was to love; and, as the time passed, their love grew stronger, until at last the fatality which had presided over their first meeting brought

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them once more together. They chanced to be visiting at the same time the old Duchesse d'Arlange, who had recently returned to the neighborhood to dispose of her remaining property. They spoke to each other, and, like old friends, surprised to find that they entertained the same thoughts and echoed the same memories. Again they were separated for months. But ere long, as if by accident, both chanced to be regularly on the banks of the Rhone at a certain hour, when they would sit and gaze across the river at each other. Finally, one mild May evening, when Madame de la Verberie had gone to Beaucaire, Gaston ventured into the park, and presented himself before Valentine. She was neither surprised nor indignant. Genuine innocence displays none of the startled modesty assumed by its conventional counterfeit. It never occurred to Valentine to bid Gaston to leave her. She leaned upon his arm, and strolled up and down the grand old avenue of oaks with him. They did not say they loved each other, they felt it; but they did say with tears in their eyes that their love was hopeless. They well knew that the inveterate family feud could never be overcome, and that the attempt would be mere folly. They swore never, never to forget each other, and mournfully resolved never to meet again, excepting just once more!

Alas! Valentine was not without excuse. Possessed of a timid, loving heart, her expansive affection had always been repressed and chilled by a harsh mother. Never had there been one of those long private talks between the Comtesse de la Verberie and Valentine which enables a good mother to read her daughter's heart like an open book. Madame de la Verberie concerned herself only with her daughter's beauty. She was wont to think: "Next winter I will borrow enough to take the child to Paris, and I am much mistaken if her handsome looks do not win her a rich husband and release me from this wretched state of poverty." She considered this loving her daughter! The second meeting of the lovers was not the last. Gaston dared not trust a boatman, so that he had to walk a league in order to cross the bridge. He thought it would be shorter work to swim the river; but he could not swim well, and to cross the Rhone where it ran so rapidly was a rash proceeding even for the most skilful swimmer.

However, he practised privately, and to such good purpose that one evening Valentine was startled by seeing him rise

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out of the water at her feet. She made him promise never to attempt this exploit again. Still he repeated the feat and the promise the next and every successive evening. As Valentine was always imagining he was being drowned in the furious current, they agreed upon a signal to relieve her anxiety. At the moment of starting, Gaston would place a light in his window at Clameran, and in a quarter of an hour he would be at his idol's feet.

What were the projects and hopes of the lovers? Alas! they had no projects, and they hoped for nothing. Blindly, thoughtlessly, almost fearlessly, they abandoned themselves to the dangerous happiness of a daily meeting. Regardless of the storm that threatened to burst over their heads, they reveled in their present happiness. Is it not like this with every sincere passion? Love subsists upon itself and in itself; and the very things which ought to extinguish it, absence and obstacles, only cause it to burn more fiercely. It is exclusive and troubled neither with the past nor the future; it sees and cares for nothing beyond its present enjoyment. Moreover, Valentine and Gaston believed every one ignorant of their secret. They had always been so exceedingly cautious! they had kept such a strict watch! They flattered themselves that their conduct had been a masterpiece of dissimulation and prudence. Valentine had fixed upon a time for their meetings when she was certain her mother would not miss her. Gaston had never confided his secret to any one, not even to his brother Louis. They never mentioned each other's name. They denied themselves a last sweet word, a final kiss, when they felt these would be attended with danger. Poor blind lovers! As if anything could be concealed from the idle curiosity of country gossips; from the slanderous spirits ever on the lookout for some new bit of scandal, on which they improve and eagerly spread far and near. They believed their secret well kept, whereas it had long since been a matter of public notoriety; the story of their love, the particulars of their meetings, were topics of conversation throughout the neighborhood. Sometimes at dusk they would see a boat gliding through the water, close to the shore, and would say to each other: "It is a belated fisherman returning home." They were mistaken. On board the boat were spies, who, delighted at having discovered them, hastened to report, with a number of false details, the result of their shameful expedition.

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One dreary November evening, Gaston was awakened to the true state of affairs. The Rhone was so swollen by heavy rains that an inundation was daily expected. To attempt to swim across this impetuous torrent would be tempting Providence. Gaston therefore went to Tarascon, intending to cross the bridge there, and to walk along the bank to the usual place of meeting at La Verberie, where Valentine expected him at eleven o'clock. Whenever Gaston went to Tarascon, he dined with a relative living there; but on this occasion a strange fatality led him to accompany a friend to the Hotel of the Three Emperors. After dinner, instead of going to the Cafe Simon, their usual resort, they went to the little cafe facing the open space where the fairs are held. They found the small apartment crowded with young men of the town. Gaston and his friend called for a bottle of beer, and commenced a game at billiards. After they had been playing for a short time, Gaston's attention was attracted by peals of forced laughter from a party at the other end of the room. From this moment, with his attention taken up by this continued laughter, of which he believed himself the object, he knocked the balls about recklessly. His conduct surprised his friend, who remarked to him: "Why, what is the matter? You are missing the simplest strokes."

"It is nothing."

The game continued a little while longer, when Gaston suddenly turned as white as a sheet, and, throwing down his cue, strode toward the table which was occupied by five young men, playing dominoes and drinking mulled wine. He addressed the elder of the group, a handsome man of twenty-six, with large bright eyes, and a fierce black mustache, named Jules Lazet. "Repeat, if you dare," he said, in a voice trembling with passion, "the remark you just now made!"

"Who would prevent me?" asked Lazet calmly. "I said, and I repeat, that a nobleman's daughter is no better than a workman's daughter; that virtue does not necessarily accompany a title."

"You mentioned a particular name!"

Lazet rose from his chair as if he knew his answer would exasperate Gaston, and that from words they would come to blows. "I did," he said, with an insolent smile. "I mentioned the name of the pretty little fairy of La Verberie."

At this all the young men, and even a couple of commercial

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travelers who were dining at the cafe, rose and surrounded the two disputants. The provoking looks, the murmurs, the shouts, which were directed toward Gaston as he walked up to Lazet, convinced him that he was surrounded by enemies. The wickedness and the evil tongue of the old marquis were bearing their fruit. Rancor ferments quickly and fiercely in the hearts and heads of the people of Provence. But Gaston de Clameran was not a man to withdraw, even if his foes were a hundred, instead of fifteen or twenty.

"No one but a coward," he said, in a clear, ringing voice, which the pervading silence rendered almost startling; "no one but a contemptible coward would be base enough to calumniate a young girl who has neither father nor brother to defend her honor."

"If she has no father or brother," sneered Lazet, "she has her lovers, and that suffices."

The insulting words, "her lovers," enraged Gaston beyond control; he struck Lazet violently in the face. Every one in the cafe simultaneously uttered a cry of alarm. Lazet's violence of character, his herculean strength and undaunted courage, were well known. He sprang over the table that separated him from Gaston, and seized him by the throat. Then arose a scene of excitement and confusion. De Clameran's friend, attempting to assist him, was knocked down with billiard-cues, and kicked under a table. Equally strong and agile, Gaston and Lazet struggled for some minutes without either gaining an advantage. Lazet, as loyal as he was courageous, would not accept assistance from his friends. He continually called out: "Keep away; let me fight it out alone!"

But the others were too excited to remain inactive spectators of the scene. "A blanket, quick!" cried one of them; "a blanket to toss the marquis!"

Five or six young men now rushed upon Gaston, and separated him from Lazet. Some tried to throw him down, others to trip him up. He defended himself with the energy of despair, exhibiting in his furious struggles a strength of which no one would have thought him capable. He struck right and left as he showered fierce epithets upon his adversaries, who were twelve against one. He was endeavoring to get round the billiard-table so as to be near the door, and had almost succeeded, when an exultant cry arose: "Here is the blanket!"

"Put him in the blanket—the little fairy's lover!"

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Gaston heard these cries. He saw himself overcome, and suffering an ignoble outrage at the hands of these enraged men. By a dexterous movement he extricated himself from the grasp of the three who were holding him, and felled a fourth to the ground. His arms were free; but all his enemies returned to the charge. Then he seemed to lose his head, and seizing a knife which lay on the table where the commercial travelers had been dining, he plunged it twice into the breast of the first man who rushed upon him. This unfortunate man was Jules Lazet. He dropped to the ground. There was a second of silent horror. Then four or five of the young men rushed forward to raise Lazet. The landlady ran about wringing her hands, and screaming with fright. Some of the younger assailants rushed into the streets shouting: "Murder! Murder!" But all the others turned upon Gaston with cries of vengeance. He felt that he was lost. His enemies seized the first objects they could lay their hands upon and he received several wounds. He jumped upon the billiard-table, and making a rapid spring, dashed at the large window of the cafe. He was fearfully cut by the broken glass and splinters, but he passed through.

Gaston was outside, but he was not yet saved. Astonished and disconcerted at his desperate feat, his assailants for a moment were stupefied; but recovering their presence of mind, they started in pursuit of him. Gaston ran on from tree to tree, making frequent turnings. Finally he determined, if possible, to reach Clameran. With incredible rapidity he darted diagonally across the open space, in the direction of the embankment which protects the valley of Tarascon from inundations. Unfortunately, upon reaching this embankment, Gaston forgot that the entrance was partially closed by three posts, such as are always placed before walks intended for foot-passengers only, and rushed against one of them with such violence that he was thrown back and badly bruised. He quickly sprang up; but his pursuers were upon him. This time he could expect no mercy. The infuriated men at his heels yelled: "To the Rhone with him! To the Rhone with the marquis!"

His forehead was cut, and the blood trickled from the wound into his eyes, and blinded him. He must escape, or die in the attempt. He had tightly clasped the bloody knife with which he had stabbed Lazet. He struck his nearest foe; the man fell to the ground with a heavy groan. This blow gained him a moment's respite, which gave him time to pass between the

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posts, and rush along the embankment. Two men remained kneeling over their wounded companion, and five others resumed the pursuit. But Gaston ran fast, for the horror of his situation tripled his energy. With elbows kept tight to his sides, and holding his breath, he went along at such a speed that he soon distanced his pursuers. Gaston ran on for another mile, and only when he knew he was safe from capture sank down at the foot of a tree to rest. Only forty minutes had elapsed since Gaston and his friend entered the cafe. These forty minutes had given him more cause for sorrow and remorse than the whole of his previous life put together. He had killed a man, and still convulsively held the murderous instrument; he cast it from him with horror. He tried to account for the dreadful circumstances which had just taken place. If he alone had been lost! But Valentine was dragged down with him; her reputation was gone. And it was his want of self-command which had cast to the winds this honor, confided to his keeping, and which he held far dearer than his own.

But he could not remain here bewailing his misfortune. The authorities must soon be on his track. They would certainly go to the chateau of Clameran to seek him. He started to walk, but with great pain, for the reaction had come, and his nerves and muscles, so violently strained, had now begun to relax. His hip and shoulder pained him almost beyond endurance. The cut on his forehead had almost stopped bleeding, but the coagulated blood round his eyes nearly blinded him. After a painful walk he reached home at ten o'clock. The old valet who admitted him started back terrified. "Good heavens, sir! what is the matter?"—"Silence!" said Gaston in the brief, compressed tone always inspired by imminent danger, "silence! Where is my father?"—"The marquis is in his room with M. Louis. He has had a sudden attack of the gout, and can not put his foot to the ground; but you, sir—" Gaston did not stop to listen further. He hurried to his father's room. The old marquis, who was playing backgammon with Louis, dropped his dice-box with a cry of horror, when he looked up and saw his eldest son standing before him covered with blood. "What is the matter? what have you been doing, Gaston?" he exclaimed.

"I have come to embrace you for the last time, father, and to ask for assistance to escape abroad."—"You wish to fly?"—"I must, father, and instantly; I am pursued, the gendarmes may be here at any moment. I have killed two men."

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The marquis was so shocked that he forgot the gout, and attempted to rise; a violent twinge made him drop back into his chair. "Where? When?" he gasped.—"At Tarascon, in a cafe, an hour ago; fifteen men attacked me, and I seized a knife to defend myself."—"The old tricks of '93," said the marquis. "Did they insult you, Gaston?"—"They insulted in my presence the name of a noble young girl."—"And you punished the rascals? By heaven! you did well. But who was the lady you defended?"

"Mademoiselle Valentine de la Verberie."

"What!" cried the marquis, "what! the daughter of that old witch! Those accursed La Verberies have always brought misfortune upon us." He certainly abominated the comtesse; but his respect for her noble blood was greater than his resentment toward her individuality, and he added: "Nevertheless, Gaston, you did your duty."

Meanwhile, the curiosity of Jean, the marquis's old valet, made him venture to open the door, and ask: "Did Monsieur the Marquis ring?"—"No, you rascal," answered M. de Clameran, "you know very well I did not. But now you are here, be useful. Quickly bring some clothes for M. Gaston, some clean linen, and some warm water: everything necessary to dress his wounds."

These orders were promptly executed, and Gaston found he was not so badly hurt as he had thought. With the exception of a deep stab in his left shoulder, his wounds were not serious. The marquis made a sign to the servants to leave the room. "Do you still think you ought to leave France?" he asked Gaston.—"Yes, father."—"My brother ought not to hesitate," interposed Louis; "he will be arrested here, thrown into prison, vilified in court, and—who knows?"—"We all know well enough that he will be convicted," grumbled the old marquis. "These are the benefits of the immortal Revolution, as it is called."

"There is no time to lose," observed Louis.—"True," said the marquis, "but to fly, to go abroad, one must have money; and I have none by me to give to him."—"Father!"—"No, I have none. Ah, what a prodigal old fool I have been! Have I even a hundred louis?" Then he told Louis to open the secretary. The drawer in which the money was kept contained only nine hundred and twenty francs in gold. "Nine hundred and twenty francs," cried the marquis; "it is not enough. The

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eldest son of our house can not fly the country with this paltry sum."

He sat lost in reflection. Suddenly his brow cleared, and he told Louis to open a secret drawer in the secretary, and bring him a small casket. Then the marquis took from his neck a black ribbon, to which was attached the key of the casket. His sons observed with what deep emotion he unlocked it, and slowly took out a necklace, a cross, several rings, and various other jewels. His countenance assumed a solemn expression. "Gaston, my dear son," he said, "at a time like this your life may depend upon bought assistance; money is power." —"I am young, father, and have courage."—"Listen to me. These jewels belonged to your sainted mother, a noble woman, who is now in heaven watching over us. They have never left me. During my days of misery and want, when I was compelled to earn a livelihood by teaching music in London, I piously treasured them. I never thought of selling them; and to pawn them, in the hour of direst need, would have seemed to me a sacrilege. But now, take them, my son, and sell them; they will fetch twenty thousand francs."—"No, my father, no, I can not take them!"—"You must, Gaston. If your mother were on earth, she would tell you to take them, as I do now. I command you to take and use them. The safety, the honor, of the heir of the house of De Clameran must not be imperiled for want of a little gold."

With tearful eyes, Gaston sank on his knees, and, carrying his father's hand to his lips, murmured: "Thanks, father, thanks! In my heedless, ungrateful presumption I have hitherto misjudged you. I did not know your noble character. Forgive me. I accept; but I take them as a sacred deposit, confided to my honor, and for which I will some day account to you."

In their emotion, the marquis and Gaston forgot the threatened danger. But Louis was not touched by the affecting scene. "Time presses," he said: "you had better hasten."—"He is right," cried the marquis; "go, Gaston, go, my son; and Heaven protect the heir of the De Clamerans!" Gaston slowly got up, and said with an embarrassed air: "Before leaving you, father, I must fulfil a sacred duty. I have not told you everything. I love Valentine, the young girl whose honor I defended this evening."—"Oh!" cried the marquis, thunderstruck, "oh, oh!" —"And I entreat you, father, to ask Madame de la Verberie

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for her daughter's hand. Valentine will gladly join me abroad, and share my exile."

Gaston stopped, frightened at the effect of his words. The old marquis had become crimson, or rather purple, as if struck by apoplexy. "Preposterous!" he gasped. "Impossible! Perfect folly!"—"I love her, father, and have promised her never to marry another."—"Then you will remain a bachelor."—"I shall marry her!" cried Gaston excitedly. "I shall marry her because I have sworn I would, and I will not be so base as to desert her."—"Nonsense!"—"I tell you Mademoiselle de la Verberie must and shall be my wife. It is too late for me to draw back. Even if I no longer loved her, I would still marry her, because she has given herself to me; because, can't you understand? what was said at the cafe to-night was true: Valentine is my mistress."

Gaston's confession, forced from him by circumstances, produced a very different impression from that which he had expected. The enraged marquis instantly became cool, and his mind seemed relieved of an immense weight. A wicked joy sparkled in his eyes, as he replied: "I congratulate you, Gaston."

"Sir!" interrupted Gaston indignantly; "I have told you that I love her, and have promised to marry her. You seem to forget."—"Ta, ta, ta!" cried the marquis, "your scruples are absurd. You know full well that one of her ancestors led one of our girls astray. Now we are quits! And so she is your mistress—"

"I swear by my mother's memory that Valentine shall be my wife!"—"Do you dare assume that tone toward me?" cried the exasperated marquis. "Never, understand me clearly, never will I give my consent. You know how dear to me is the honor of our house. Well, I would rather see you tried for murder, and even condemned, than married to this hussy!"

This last word was too much for Gaston. "Then your wish shall be gratified, sir. I will remain here, and be arrested. I care not what becomes of me! What is life to me without the hope of Valentine? Take back these jewels; they are useless now."

A terrible scene would have ensued between the father and son had they not been interrupted by a domestic who rushed into the room, and excitedly exclaimed: "The gendarmes! here are the gendarmes!" At this news the old marquis started up, and seemed to forget his gout, which had yielded to more vio-

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lent emotions. "Gendarmes!" he cried, "in my house, at Clameran! They shall pay dear for their insolence! You will help me, will you not, my men?"—"Yes, yes," answered the servants. "Down with the gendarmes! down with them!"

Fortunately, Louis, during all this excitement, preserved his presence of mind. "To resist would be folly," he said. "Even if we repulsed the gendarmes to-night, they would return to-morrow with reenforcements."—"Louis is right," said the marquis bitterly. "Might is right, as they said in '93. The gendarmes are all-powerful. Do they not even have the impertinence to come up to me while I am out shooting, and ask to see my license?—I, a De Clameran, show a license!"

"Where are they?" asked Louis of the servants.

"At the outer gate," answered La Verdure, one of the grooms. "Do you not hear the noise they are making with their sabres, sir?"—"Then Gaston must escape by the garden door."—"It is guarded, sir," said La Verdure in despair, "and the little gate in the park also. There seems to be a regiment of them. They are even stationed along the park walls."

"Then," said the marquis, "we are surrounded?"—"Not a single chance of escape," groaned Jean.—"We shall see about that!" cried the marquis. "Ah, we are not the strongest, but we can be the most artful. Attention! Louis, my son, you and La Verdure go down to the stables, and mount the fastest horses; then as quietly as possible station yourselves, you, Louis, at the park gate, and you, La Verdure, at the outer gate. You others, go and post yourselves at either of the gates. Upon the signal I shall give by firing off a pistol, let both gates be instantly opened. Louis and La Verdure must spur on their horses, and do all they can to pass through the gendarmes, who are sure to follow in pursuit."

"I will make them run," said La Verdure.

"Listen. During this time, Gaston, aided by Jean, will scale the park wall, and hasten along the river-bank to the cabin of Pilorel, the fisherman. He is an old sailor, and devoted to our house. He will take Gaston in his boat; and, when they are once on the Rhone, there is nothing to be feared save heaven. Now go, all of you; do as I have said."

Left alone with his son, the old marquis slipped the jewels into a silk purse, and stretching out his arms toward Gaston said, in broken accents: "Come here, my son, and let me bless you." Gaston hesitated. "Come," insisted the old man, "I

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must embrace you for the last time. I may never see you again. Save yourself, save your name, Gaston, and then—you know how I love you. Take back these jewels—" For an instant father and son clung to each other, overpowered by emotion. But the continued noise at the gate now reached their ears. "We must part!" said M. de Clameran. And, taking a pair of small pistols, he handed them to his son, and added with averted eyes: "You must not be captured alive, Gaston!"

Unfortunately Gaston did not immediately hasten to the park wall. He yearned more than ever to see Valentine, and he perceived a possibility of being able to bid her farewell. He could persuade Pilorel to stop the boat when they reached the park of La Verberie. He therefore employed the few minutes respite that destiny had allowed him in going to his room and placing in the window the signal that would tell Valentine he was coming; and even waited for an answering light. "Come, M. Gaston," entreated old Jean, who could not understand this strange conduct. "For heaven's sake, make haste! your life is at stake!"

At last he came running down the stairs, and had just reached the hall when a pistol-shot, the signal given by the marquis, resounded through the house. The swinging open of the large gate, the rattling of the sabres of the gendarmes, the furious galloping of many horses, and a chorus of loud shouts and angry oaths, were next heard. Leaning against the window of his room, his brow covered with perspiration, the Marquis de Clameran breathlessly awaited the issue of this expedient, upon which depended the life of his eldest son. His measures were excellent. As he had planned, Louis and La Verdure managed to dash out through the gates, one to the right and the other to the left, each one pursued by a crowd of mounted men. Their horses flew like arrows, and kept far ahead of the pursuers. Gaston was as good as saved, when fate—but was it only fate?—interfered. Suddenly Louis's horse stumbled, and fell to the ground with his rider under him. Immediately surrounded by the gendarmes, M. de Clameran's second son was easily recognized. "He is not the murderer!" cried one of the young men of the town. "Let us hurry back, they are trying to deceive us!"

They returned just in time to see, by the uncertain light of the moon peeping from behind a cloud, Gaston climbing the

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wall. "There is our man!" exclaimed a corporal. "Keep your eyes open, and gallop after him!" They spurred their horses, and hastened to the spot where Gaston had jumped from the wall. He found himself in an immense madder-field, and it is well known that this valuable root, having to remain in the ground three years, the furrows are necessarily plowed very deep. Horses cannot gallop over its uneven surface; indeed, they can scarcely stand steadily upon it. This circumstances brought the gendarmes to a dead halt. Jumping from furrow to furrow, Gaston soon left his pursuers far behind, and reached a vast plantation covered with undergrowth. The horsemen urged each other on, and called out every time they saw Gaston running from one clump of trees to another. Being familiar with the country, young De Clameran did not despair. He knew that after the plantation came a field of thistles, and that the two were separated by a wide, deep ditch. He resolved to jump into this ditch, run along the bottom, and climb out at the further end, while the others were still looking for him among the trees. But he had forgotten the rising of the river.

Upon reaching the ditch, he found it full of water. Discouraged but not disconcerted, he was about to jump across, when three horsemen appeared on the opposite side. They were gendarmes who had ridden round the madder-field and the plantation, knowing they would easily make up for lost time on the level ground of the field of thistles. At the sight of these three men, Gaston stood perplexed. He would certainly be captured if he attempted to run through the field, at the end of which he could see the cabin of Pilorel, the fisherman. To retrace his steps would be to surrender to the hussars. At a little distance on his right was a small wood, but he was separated from it by a road upon which he heard the sound of horses' hoofs. He would certainly be caught there also. On his left was the surging, foaming river. What was to be done? He felt the circle of which he was the centre fast narrowing around him. Must he, then, fall back upon the pistols, and there, in the midst of the country, hunted by gendarmes like a wild beast, blow his brains out? No! He would seize the one chance of salvation left him—the river. Holding a pistol in either hand, he ran to the edge of a little promontory, projecting a few yards into the Rhone. This cape of refuge was formed by the giant trunk of a fallen tree, which swayed

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and cracked fearfully under Gaston's weight, as he stood on the further end, and looked back upon his pursuers; there were fifteen of them, some on the right, some on the left, all uttering cries of joy.

"Do you surrender?" called out the corporal of gendarmes. Gaston did not answer; he was weighing his chances. He was above the park of La Verberie; would he be able to swim there, granting that he was not swept away and drowned the instant he plunged into the angry torrent before him? He pictured Valentine, at that very moment, watching, waiting and praying for him on the other shore.

"For the second time do you surrender?" cried the corporal. The unfortunate man did not hear; he was deafened by the waters which were roaring and rushing past him. Although death stared him in the face, Gaston calmly considered which would be the best spot to take his plunge, and commended his soul to God.

"He will stand there until we go after him," said a gendarme; "so we may as well do so at once." But Gaston had finished his prayer. He flung his pistols in the direction of the gendarmes: he was ready. He made the sign of the cross, and then, with outstretched arms, plunged into the Rhone. The violence of his spring loosened the few remaining roots of the old tree; it swayed for a moment, turned over, and then rapidly drifted away. The spectators uttered a cry of horror and pity rather than of anger.

"That is the end of him," muttered one of the gendarmes; "he is done for; a man can't fight against the Rhone; his body will be washed ashore at Arles to-morrow."

The hussars seemed really grieved at the tragic fate of this brave, handsome, young man, whom a moment before they had pursued so tenaciously.

"An ugly piece of work!" grumbled the old sergeant who had command of the hussars.

"Bah!" exclaimed the philosophic corporal, "the Rhone is no worse than the assize-court. Right about, my men. The thing that troubles me is the idea of that poor old man who is waiting to hear his son's fate. I would not be the one to tell him what has happened. March!"

lover came not.

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XIII

VALENTINE knew that fatal evening that Gaston would have to walk to Tarascon to cross the Rhone by the suspension bridge which connects Tarascon with Beaucaire, and did not expect to see him until eleven o'clock, the time which they had agreed upon the previous evening. But, happening to look up at the windows of Clameran long before the appointed hour, she saw lights hurrying to and fro in the different rooms in a most unusual manner. A secret and imperious voice within her breast told her that something terrible and extraordinary was going on at the chateau of Clameran. With her eyes fastened upon the dark mass looming in the distance she watched the going and coming of the lights, as if their movements would give her a clue to what was taking place within those walls. Her anxiety grew more intolerable every moment, when suddenly the well-known, beloved signal appeared in Gaston's window, informing her that her lover was about to swim across the Rhone. She could scarcely believe her eyes, and not until the signal had been thrice repeated did she answer it. Then, more dead than alive, she hastened, trembling, through the park to the river-bank. Never had she seen the Rhone so furious. Since Gaston was risking his life to see her, she could no longer doubt that something fearful had occurred at Clameran. She fell on her knees, and with clasped hands, her wild eyes fixed upon the dark waters, besought the pitiless stream to yield up her dear Gaston. Every dark object floating by assumed a human form. Once she thought she heard above the roaring of the water, the terrible, agonized cry of a drowning man. She watched and prayed, but her lover came not.

While the gendarmes and hussars slowly and silently returned to the chateau of Clameran, Gaston experienced one of those miracles which would seem incredible were they not confirmed by the most convincing proof. When he first plunged into the river, he rolled over five or six times, and was then drawn toward the bottom. In a swollen river the current varies at

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different depths, being much stronger in some places than in others; hence the great danger. Gaston knew this, and guarded against it. Instead of wasting his strength in vain struggles, he held his breath and drifted with the flood. After he had been carried a considerable distance, he made a sudden spring, which brought him to the surface. Rapidly drifting by him was the old tree, and for some seconds he was entangled in a mass of rubbish; an eddy set him free. He did not dream of making for the opposite shore. He determined to land whereso-ever he could. With great presence of mind he exerted all his strength, so as to slowly take an oblique course, knowing well, however, that there was no hope for him if the current took him crosswise. This fearful current is, moreover, as capricious as it is terrible; sometimes rushing to the right, sometimes to the left, sparing one shore and ravaging the other. Gaston, familiar with every bend of the river, knew that there was an abrupt turning just below Clameran, and relied upon the eddy formed there to sweep him in the direction of La Verberie. His expectations were fulfilled. An oblique current suddenly swept him toward the right bank, and, had he not been on his guard, would have sunk him. He was still some distance from the shore, when, with lightning rapidity, he was swept past the park of La Verberie. He caught a glimpse of a white shadow among the trees: Valentine was waiting for him. At a considerable distance below, finding himself nearer the bank, he attempted to land. Feeling a foothold, he twice raised himself, each time being thrown down by the force of the current. Finally seizing some willow branches, and, clinging to them, he climbed up the steep bank. Without waiting to take breath, he darted off at once in the direction of the park. It was time he arrived, for, overcome by the intensity of her emotions, Valentine had fainted, lying apparently lifeless on the ground. Gaston's kisses aroused her.

"You!" she cried in a tone that revealed all the love she felt for him. "Is it indeed you? Then God heard my prayers, and had pity upon us."

"No, Valentine," he murmured, "God has had no pity."

The sad tones of Gaston's voice convinced her that her presentiment of evil was well founded. "What new misfortune strikes us now?" she exclaimed. "Why have you thus risked your life—a life far dearer to me than my own? What has happened?"

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"This is what has happened, Valentine: our secret is a secret no longer; our love is the jest of the country."

She shrank back, and, burying her face in her hands, moaned piteously.

"This," continued Gaston, forgetting everything but his present misery; "this is the result of the blind enmity of our families. Our noble and pure love, which ought to be a glory in the eyes of God and man, has to be concealed, as though it were some evil deed."

"All is known, all is discovered!" murmured Valentine.

In the midst of the angry elements, Gaston had preserved his self-possession; but the heart-broken tones of his beloved Valentine overcame him. "And I was unable," he cried, "to crush the villains who dared to utter your adored name. Ah, why did I only kill two of the scoundrels!"

"You have killed some one, Gaston!"

"Yes," he replied, trying to overcome his emotion; "I have killed two men. I swam across the Rhone to save the honor of my name. Only a short time ago all the gendarmes of the place were pursuing me. I have escaped them, and now am flying the country."

Valentine struggled to preserve her composure. "Whither do you hope to fly?" she asked.

"I know not. God only knows whither I am to go or what will become of me. I must assume a false name and a disguise, and try to reach some foreign land which offers a refuge to murderers." Gaston stopped, expecting an answer to this speech. None came, and he resumed with extraordinary vehemence: "And before disappearing, Valentine, I wished to see you, because now, when I am abandoned by every one else, I have relied upon you, and had faith in your love. A tie unites us, my darling, stronger than all other earthly bonds—the tie of love. Before God you are my wife; I am yours and you are mine for life! Would you let me fly alone, Valentine? To the pain and toil of exile, to the bitter regrets of a ruined life, could you add the torture of separation?"

"Gaston, I implore you—"

"Ah, I knew it," he interrupted, mistaking the sense of her exclamation; "I knew you would not let me go alone. I knew your sympathetic heart would long to share the burden of my miseries. This moment effaces the wretched suffering I have endured. Let us fly! Having our happiness to defend, I fear

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nothing; I can brave and conquer all. Come, my Valentine, we will escape, or die together! This is the long-dreamed-of happiness! The glorious future of love and liberty opens before us!"

He had worked himself into a state of delirious excitement. He seized Valentine round the waist and tried to carry her off. But, as his exaltation increased, she managed to regain her composure. Gently, yet with a firmness he had not expected in her, she withdrew herself from his embrace, and said sadly, but resolutely: "What you wish, Gaston, is impossible."

This cold, inexplicable resistance seemed to confound her lover. "Impossible?" he stammered.

"You know me well enough, Gaston, to be convinced that sharing the greatest hardships with you would to me be the height of happiness. But above your pleading, to which I fain would yield, above the voice of my own heart, which urges me to follow you, there is another—powerful, imperious—which bids me stay: the voice of duty."

"What! Would you think of remaining here after the horrible affair of to-night, after the scandal that will be spread abroad to-morrow!"

"What do you mean? That I am lost, dishonored? Am I any more so to-day than I was yesterday? Do you think that the jeers and scoffing of the world could make me suffer more than the pangs of my guilty conscience? I have long since passed judgment upon myself, Gaston; and, although the sound of your voice and the touch of your hand made me forget all save the bliss of love, no sooner had you gone than I wept tears of shame and remorse."

Gaston listened, motionless, astounded. He seemed to see a new Valentine before him, an entirely different woman from the one whose tender soul he thought he knew so well. "And your mother?" he murmured.

"It is my duty to her that keeps me here. Do you wish me to prove an unnatural daughter, and desert her now that she is poor, lonely, and friendless, with no one but me to cling to? Could I abandon her to follow my lover?"

"But our enemies will inform her of everything, Valentine; she will know all."

"No matter. The dictates of conscience must be obeyed. Ah, why can I not, even at the price of my life, spare her the agony of learning that her only daughter, her Valentine,

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has disgraced her name? She may be hard, cruel, pitiless toward me; but have I not deserved it? Oh, my only friend, we have been basking in a dream too beautiful to last! I have long dreaded this awful awakening. Like two weak, credulous fools, we imagined that happiness could exist beyond the pale of duty. Sooner or later stolen joys must be dearly paid for. We must bow our heads and drink the cup to the dregs."

This cold reasoning, this sad resignation, was more than Gaston's fiery nature could bear. "Do not talk like that!" he cried. "Can you not feel that the bare idea of your suffering this humiliation drives me mad?"

"Alas! I must expect greater humiliation yet."

"What do you mean, Valentine?"

"Know then, Gaston—" But she stopped short, hesitated, and then added: "Nothing! I know not what I say."

Had Gaston been less excited, he would have suspected some new misfortune beneath Valentine's reticence; but his mind was too full of his one idea. "All hope is not lost," he resumed. "My father is kind hearted, and was touched by my love and despair. I am sure that my letters, together with the intercession of my brother Louis, will induce him to ask Madame de la Verberie for your hand."

This notion seemed to terrify Valentine. "Heaven forbid!" she exclaimed, "that the marquis should take this rash step!"

"Why, Valentine?"

"Because my mother would reject his offer; because, I must confess it now, she has sworn I shall marry none but a rich man; and your father is not rich."

"Good heavens!" cried Gaston with disgust, "and it is to such a mother that you sacrifice me?"

"She is my mother; that is sufficient. I have not the right to judge her. My duty is to remain with her, and remain I will." Valentine's manner showed such determined resolution that Gaston saw that further prayers would be in vain.

"Alas!" he cried as he wrung his hands with despair, "you do not love me; you have never loved me!"

"Gaston, Gaston! you do not think what you say!"

"If you loved me," he cried, "you could never, at this moment of separation, have the cruel courage to reason and calculate so coldly. Ah, far different is my love for you. Without you the world is void; to lose you is to die. So let the Rhone take back this life so miraculously saved; for it is now a bur-

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den to me!" And he would have rushed toward the river, determined to die, had Valentine not held him back. "Is this the way to show your love for me?" she asked.

"What is the use of living?" he murmured dejectedly. "What is left to me now?"

"God is left to us, Gaston; and in His hands lies our future."

Like a shipwrecked man seizing a rotten plank, Gaston eagerly caught at the word *"future."* "Your command shall be obeyed," he cried with sudden enthusiasm. "Away with weakness! Yes, I will live, and struggle, and triumph. Madame de la Verberie wants gold; well, in three years I shall either be rich or dead." With clasped hands Valentine thanked heaven for this determination, which was more than she had dared hope for. "But," continued Gaston, "before going away I wish to intrust a sacred deposit to your keeping." And, drawing the jewels from his pocket and handing them to Valentine, he added: "These jewels belonged to my poor mother; you alone are worthy to wear them. I always intended them for you." And as she refused to accept them, he insisted. "Take them as a pledge of my return. If I do not come back within three years, you will know that I am dead, and then you must keep them as a souvenir of him who loved you so fondly." She burst into tears, and took the jewels. "And now," resumed Gaston, "I have a last request to make. Everybody believes me dead, but I can not let my poor old father remain under this impression. Swear to me that you will go yourself tomorrow morning and tell him that I am still alive."

"I will tell him," she replied.

Gaston felt that he must now tear himself away before his courage failed him. He enveloped Valentine in a last fond embrace, and started up. "What is your plan of escape?" she asked.

"I shall go to Marseilles, and take refuge in a friend's house until I can procure a passage on board some foreign-bound vessel."

"You must have assistance; I will secure you a guide in whom I have unbounded confidence; old Menoul, who lives near us. He owns the boat which he plies on the Rhone."

The lovers passed through the little park gate, of which Gaston had the key, and soon reached the boatman's cabin. He was dozing in his easy-chair by the fireside. When Valentine stood before him with Gaston, the old man jumped up,

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and kept rubbing his eyes, thinking it must be a dream. "M. Menoul," said Valentine, "M. Gaston is compelled to hide himself; he wants to reach the sea, so that he can embark secretly. Can you take him in your boat as far as the mouth of the Rhone?"

"It is impossible," said the old man, shaking his head; "I dare not venture on the river in its present state."

"But, M. Menoul, you would be rendering an immense service to me; would you not venture for my sake?"

"For your sake? certainly I would, Mademoiselle Valentine; I am ready to start." He looked at Gaston, and, seeing his clothes wet and covered with mud, said to him: "Allow me, sir, to offer you some clothes of a son of mine who is dead; they will, at least, serve as a disguise: come this way."

In a few minutes old Menoul returned with Gaston, whom no one would have recognized in his sailor dress. Valentine went with them to the place where the boat was moored. While the old man was unfastening it, the disconsolate lovers tearfully embraced each other for the last time. "In three years," cried Gaston, "in three years!"

"Adieu, mademoiselle," interrupted the old boatman; "and you, sir, hold fast and keep steady." Then, with a vigorous shove of the boat-hook, he sent the boat into the middle of the stream.

Three days later, thanks to the assistance of old Menoul, Gaston was concealed on board the American three-master, "Tom Jones," Captain Warth, which was to start the next day for Valparaiso.

XIV

GOLD and white like a marble statue, Valentine stood on the river-bank, watching the frail bark which was carrying her lover away. It flew along like a bird in a tempest, and, after a few seconds, seemed like a black speck in the midst of the heavy fog. Gaston gone, she had no motive for concealing her despair; and, wringing her hands, she sobbed as if her

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heart would break. Her calmness, bravery, and hopefulness were gone. She felt crushed and lost, as if that swiftly disappearing bark had carried off the better part of herself. For while Gaston treasured a ray of hope, she looked forward only to shame and sorrow. The horrible facts which stared her in the face convinced her that happiness in this life was over; the future was worse than blank. She wept and shuddered at the prospect. She slowly retraced her footsteps through the little gate which had so often admitted Gaston; and, as she closed it behind her, she fancied she was placing an impassable barrier between herself and happiness. Before retiring, Valentine carefully walked round the chateau, and examined the windows of her mother's chamber. They were still brilliantly lighted, for Madame de la Verberie passed a part of the night in reading, and did not rise till late in the morning. Enjoying the comforts, which are not expensive in the country, the selfish comtesse was little concerned about her daughter. She left her at perfect liberty to go and come, and to take long walks, never making a remark.

But on this night Valentine feared being seen. She would be called upon to explain her torn, muddy dress—and what answer could she give? Fortunately she reached her room without meeting any one, and there, seated before her little work-table, she examined the purse of jewels. It would be a sweet, sad comfort to wear the simplest of the rings, she thought; but her mother would ask her where it came from, and she would have to deceive her again. She kissed the purse, in memory of Gaston, and then concealed it at the bottom of a drawer.

Blinded by his passion, Gaston did not think of the obstacles and dangers to be braved in going to Clameran to inform the old marquis of his son's miraculous preservation. Valentine saw them only too clearly; yet it did not occur to her for an instant to break her promise or delay to go. At sunrise she dressed herself. When the bell was ringing for early mass, she started on her errand. One of the servants, Mihonne, who always waited on Valentine, was scrubbing the hall.

"If my mother asks for me," she said to the girl, "tell her I have gone to early mass."

As she often went to church at this hour, there was nothing to be feared so far; but Valentine knew that she could scarcely return in time for breakfast, for she must walk a league to the

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bridge, and it was another league to Clameran; four leagues there and back. She set out at a rapid pace. The consciousness of performing an extraordinary action, and the feverish anxiety of incurred peril, increased her haste. She forgot fatigue, and that she had worn herself out with weeping all night. It was after eight, however, when she reached the long avenue leading to the chateau of Clameran. She had only proceeded a few steps along it, when she saw old Jean, the marquis's valet, coming down the path. She stopped and waited for him, and he hastened his steps at sight of her. He looked very much excited, and his eyes were swollen with weeping. To Valentine's surprise, he did not take off his cap to her, but accosted her most rudely.

"Are you going to the chateau, mademoiselle?"

"Yes."

"If you are going after M. Gaston," continued the servant with an insolent sneer, "you are taking useless trouble. M. Gaston is dead, mademoiselle; he sacrificed himself for a mistress he had."

Valentine turned white at this insult, but took no notice of it. Jean, who expected to see her overcome by the dreadful news, was bewildered and indignant at her composure. "I am going to the chateau," she resumed quietly, "to speak to the marquis."

Jean stifled a sob, and said: "Then it is not worth while to go any farther."

"Why?"

"Because the Marquis de Clameran died at five o'clock this morning."

Valentine leaned against a tree to prevent herself from falling. "Dead!" she gasped.

"Yes," said Jean fiercely, "yes, dead!" A faithful servant of the old regime, Jean shared all the passions, weaknesses, friendships, and enmities of his master. He had a horror of the La Verberies. And now he saw in Valentine the woman who had caused the death of the marquis whom he had served for forty years, and of Gaston whom he worshiped. "I will tell you how he died," continued the bitter old man. "Yesterday evening, when the news reached the marquis that his eldest son was dead, he who was hardy as an oak dropped down as if struck by lightning. I was there. He beat the air wildly with his hands, and fell without uttering one word. We put him to

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bed, and M. Louis galloped into Tarascon for a doctor. But the blow had struck too deeply. When Dr. Raget arrived he said there was no hope. At daybreak, the marquis recovered consciousness enough to ask for M. Louis, with whom he remained alone for some minutes. His last words were: 'Father and son on the same day, there will be rejoicing at la Verberie.'"

Valentine might have soothed the faithful servant's sorrow by telling him that Gaston still lived; but she feared it would be indiscreet, and so, unfortunately, she merely said: "Then I must see M. Louis."

These words seemed to anger Jean the more. "You!" he exclaimed. "You would dare to take such a step, Mademoiselle de la Verberie? What! would you presume to appear before him after what has happened? I will never allow it! And you had best, moreover, take my advice, and return home at once. I will not answer for the tongues of the servants here, when they see you." And, without waiting for an answer, he hurried away.

What could Valentine do? Humiliated and miserable, she could only wearily drag her aching limbs back the way she had so rapidly come but a short time before. On the road, she met many country people coming from the town, where they had heard of the events of the previous night; and at every step the poor girl was greeted with insulting looks and mocking bows. When she reached La Verberie, she found Mihonne watching for her.

"Ah, mademoiselle," said the girl, "make haste. Madame had a visitor this morning, and ever since she left has been calling out for you. Hurry; but take care what you do, for she is in a violent passion."

Madame de la Verberie had preserved the manners of the good old times, when grand ladies swore like troopers. When Valentine appeared, she was overwhelmed with coarse epithets and violent abuse. The comtesse had been informed of everything, with many gross additions added by public scandal. An old dowager, her most intimate friend, had hurried over early in the morning to offer her this most poisoned dish of gossip, seasoned with her own pretended condolences. In this sad affair, Madame de la Verberie mourned less over her daughter's loss of reputation than over the ruin of her own projects—projects of arranging a grand marriage for Valentine, and of

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herself living in luxury the rest of her days. A young girl so compromised would not find it easy to get a husband. It would now be absolutely necessary to keep her two years longer in the country before introducing her into Parisian society. The world must have time to forget this shameful affair.

"You worthless wretch!" cried the comtesse, red with fury; "is it thus you respect the noble traditions of our family? Up to now it has never been considered necessary to watch the La Verberies; they could take care of their honor: but it was reserved for you to take advantage of your liberty to lower yourself to the level of those harlots who are the disgrace of their sex!"

With a sinking heart, Valentine had foreseen this tirade. She felt that it was only a fitting punishment for her guilty love. Knowing that her mother's indignation was just, she meekly hung her head like a repentant culprit at the bar of justice. But this silence only exasperated the angry comtesse the more. "Why do you not answer me?" she screamed with a threatening gesture.

"What can I say, mother?"

"Say, miserable girl? Say that they lied when they accused a La Verberie of disgracing her name! Speak, defend yourself!" Valentine mournfully shook her head, but said nothing. "It is true, then!" shrieked the comtesse, beside herself with rage; "what they said is true?"

"Forgive me, mother," moaned the poor girl; "forgive me."

"What! Forgive you! I have not then been deceived. Forgive you! Do you own it then, you hussy! Good heavens! what blood have you in your veins? Do you not know that some faults should be persistently denied, no matter how glaring the evidence against them? And you are my daughter! Can you not understand that an ignominious confession like this should never be forced from a woman by any human power? But no, you have lovers, and unblushingly avow it. Glory in it, it would be something new!"

"Alas! you are pitiless, mother!"

"Did you have any pity for me, my dutiful daughter? Did it never occur to you that your disgrace might kill me? Ah! many a time, I dare say, you and your lover have laughed at my blind confidence. For I had confidence in you as in myself. I believed you to be as chaste and pure as when I watched you lying in your cradle. And it has come to this: drunken men

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make a jest of your name in the wine-shops, then fight about you, and kill each other. I intrusted to you the honor of our name, and what have you done with it? You have given it to the first comer!" This was too much for Valentine. The words, "first comer," wounded her pride more than all the other abuse heaped upon her. She tried to protest against this unmerited insult. "Ah, I have made a mistake. Your lover is not the first comer," said the comtesse. "With the number you had to choose from, you must fix on the heir of our enemies of a hundred years, Gaston de Clameran. A coward, who publicly boasted of your favors; a wretch, who tried to avenge himself for the heroism of our ancestors by ruining you and me—an old woman and a child!"

"No, mother, that is false. He loved me, and, had he dared hope for your consent—"

"He would have married you? Ah! never. I would rather see you fall lower than you are, even to the gutter, than know you to be the wife of such a man!" Thus the comtesse expressed her hatred very much in the same terms as the old marquis had used to his son. "Besides," she added, with a ferocity which only a woman is capable of, "besides, your lover is drowned, and the old marquis is dead, so I have been told. God is just; we are avenged."

Old Jean's words, "There will be rejoicing at La Verberie," rung in Valentine's ears as she saw the comtesse's eyes sparkle with malignant joy. This was the crowning blow for the unfortunate young girl. For half an hour she had been exerting all her strength to bear up against her mother's cruel violence; but her physical endurance was not equal to the task. She turned, if possible, paler, and with half-closed eyes extended her arms as though to find some support, and fell, striking her head against a side table. It was with dry eyes that the comtesse beheld her daughter stretched at her feet. Her vanity was deeply wounded, but no other emotion disturbed her. Hers was a heart so full of anger and hatred that there was no room for any noble sentiment. Seeing, however, that Valentine remained unconscious, she rang the bell; and the affrighted maidservants, who were trembling in the passage at the loud and angry tones of the voice they all dreaded, came running in.

"Carry mademoiselle to her room," she ordered; "lock her in, and bring me the key."

The comtesse intended keeping Valentine a close prisoner

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for a long time. She well knew the mischievous, gossiping propensities of country people, who, from mere idleness, indulge in limitless scandal. A poor fallen girl must either leave the place, or drink to the very dregs the chalice of premeditated humiliation and brutal irony. Each one delights in casting a stone at her. But the comtesse's plans were destined to be baffled. The servants came to tell her that Valentine had recovered consciousness, but seemed to be very ill. She replied that it was all pretense; whereupon Mihonne insisted upon her going up and judging for herself. She unwillingly went to her daughter's room, and perceived that something serious was the matter. However, she betrayed no apprehension, but sent to Tarascon for Dr. Raget, who was the oracle of the neighborhood; it was he who had been called in to see the Marquis de Clameran. Dr. Raget was one of those men who leave a blessed memory, which lives long after their departure from this world. Intelligent and noble-hearted, he devoted himself to his art; wealthy, he never demanded to be paid for his services. At all hours of the night and day, his gray horse and old cabriolet might be seen along the roads, with a hamper of wine and soup under the seat for his poorer patients. The servant fortunately found him at home, and brought him back with him. On beholding Valentine, the doctor's face assumed a most serious expression. He studied the young girl and her mother alternately; and the penetrating gaze which he fixed on the old comtesse so disconcerted her that she felt her wrinkled face turning very red.

"This child is very ill," he said, at length. And as Madame de la Verberie made no reply, he added: "I desire to remain alone with her for a few minutes."

The comtesse dared not resist the authority of a man of Dr. Raget's character and reputation, and retired to the next room, apparently calm, but in reality disturbed by the most gloomy forebodings. At the end of half an hour—it seemed a century—the doctor entered the room where she was waiting. He, who had witnessed so much suffering and misery, appeared deeply affected.

"Well?" asked the comtesse.

"You are a mother, madame," he answered sadly—"that is to say, your heart is full of indulgence and pardon. Summon all your courage. Mademoiselle Valentine will soon become a mother."

"The worthless creature! I feared as much."

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The doctor was shocked at the dreadful expression of the comtesse's eye. He laid his hand on her arm, and giving her a penetrating look, beneath which she instantly quailed, he added: "And the child must live."

The doctor's suspicions were correct. A dreadful idea had flashed across Madame de la Verberie's mind—the idea of destroying this child which would be a living proof of Valentine's sin. Feeling her evil intention divined, the proud, stern woman's eyes fell beneath the doctor's gaze. "I do not understand you, Dr. Raget," she murmured.

"But I know what I mean, madame; and I simply wished to tell you that a crime does not obliterate a fault."

"Doctor!"

"I merely say what I think, madame. If I was mistaken in my impression, so much the better for you. At present, your daughter's condition is serious, but not dangerous. Excitement and distress of mind have unstrung her nerves, and she is now in a high fever, which I hope soon to allay."

The comtesse saw that the old doctor's suspicions were not dispelled; so she thought she would try maternal anxiety, and said: "At least, doctor, you can assure me that the dear child's life is not in danger?"

"No, madame," answered Dr. Raget, with cutting irony, "your maternal tenderness need not be alarmed. All the poor child needs is rest of mind, which you alone can give her. A few kind words from you will do her more good than all my prescriptions. But remember, madame, that the least shock of nervous excitement will produce the most fatal consequences."

"I must confess," said the comtesse, hypocritically, "that I was unable to control my anger upon first hearing that my darling child had fallen a victim to a vile seducer."

"But now that the first shock is over, madame, being a mother and a Christian, you will do your duty. My duty is to save your daughter and her child, and I will do so. I will call to-morrow."

Madame de la Verberie had no idea of letting the doctor go off in this way. She motioned him to stay, and, without reflecting that she was betraying herself, exclaimed: "Do you pretend to say, sir, that you will prevent my taking every means to conceal the terrible misfortune that has fallen upon me? Do you wish our shame to be made public—to make us the laughing-stock of the neighborhood?"

The doctor remained a moment without answering; the con-

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dition of affairs was serious. "No, madame," he at length replied; "I can not prevent your leaving La Verberie—that would be overstepping my duty; but I must hold you to account for the child. You are at liberty to go where you please; but you must give me proof of the child's being alive, or at least that no attempt was made against its life."

After uttering these threatening words he left the house. The comtesse was choking with suppressed rage. "Insolent upstart!" she cried, "to presume to dictate to a woman of my rank! Ah, if I were not completely at his mercy!" But, being in his power, she knew very well that she must forever bid adieu to all her ambitious plans. No more hopes of luxury, of a millionaire son-in-law, of splendid carriages, rich dresses, and charming card parties, where she could gamble to her heart's content. She must die as she had lived, poor, neglected, condemned to a life of privation. And it was Valentine who brought this misery upon her. This reflection aroused all her inherent bitterness, and she felt for her daughter one of those implacable hatreds which, instead of becoming appeased, are strengthened by time. She wished she could see her lying dead before her, and the accursed infant as well. But she remembered the doctor's threatening look, and dared not attempt anything. She even forced herself to go and say a few forgiving words to Valentine, and then left her to the care of the faithful Mihonne.

Poor Valentine! She had suffered so much that she had lost all power of action. She was, however, getting better. She felt that dull, heavy sensation, almost free from pain, which always follows violent mental or physical suffering. When she was able to reflect, she thought to herself: "Well, it is over; my mother knows everything. I have no longer her anger to fear, and must trust to time for her forgiveness." This was the secret which Valentine had been unwilling to reveal to Gaston, because she felt certain that he would refuse to leave her if he knew it. But she wished him to escape; and duty at the same time bade her remain. Even now she did not regret having done so.

The only thought which distressed her was Gaston's danger. Had he succeeded in embarking? How could she find out? For two days the doctor had allowed her to get up; but she could not possibly walk as far as old Menoul's cabin. Happily, the devoted old boatman was intelligent enough to anticipate

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her wishes. Hearing that the young lady at the chateau was very ill, he set about devising some means of informing her of her friend's safety. He went to La Verberie several times on pretended errands, and finally succeeded in seeing Valentine. They were not alone, so he could not speak to her; but he made her understand by a significant look that Gaston was out of danger. This knowledge contributed more toward Valentine's recovery than all the medicines administered by the doctor, who, after visiting her daily for six weeks, at length pronounced his patient sufficiently strong to bear the fatigues of a journey. The comtesse had waited with the greatest impatience for this decision. In order to prevent any delay, she had already realized half of her capital at a loss, and said to herself that the sum thus raised, some twenty-five thousand francs, would suffice for all contingent expenses. For a fortnight she had been calling on all her friends, saying that as soon as her daughter had recovered her health she meant to take her to England to visit a rich old relation, who had expressed a wish to see her.

Valentine looked forward to this journey with terror, and shuddered when her mother said to her, on the evening that the doctor gave her permission to set out: "We shall start the day after to-morrow." Only one day left! And Valentine had been unable to let Louis de Clameran know that his brother was still living. In this extremity she was obliged to confide in Mihonne, and sent her with a letter to Louis. But the faithful servant had a useless walk. The chateau of Clameran was deserted; all the servants had been dismissed, and M. Louis, whom they now called the marquis, had gone away.

At last they started. Madame de la Verberie, feeling that she could trust Mihonne, decided to take her with them, after making her swear eternal secrecy. It was in a little village near London that the comtesse, under the assumed name of Mrs. Wilson, took up her abode with her daughter and maid-servant. She selected England, because she had lived there a long time, and was well acquainted with the manners and habits of the people, and spoke their language as well as she did her own. She had kept up an acquaintance with some of the English nobility, and often dined and went to the theatre with her friends in London. On these occasions she always took the humiliating precaution of locking Valentine in her room. It was in their sad, solitary house, one night in

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the month of May, that the son of Valentine de la Verberie was born. He was taken to the parish priest, and christened Valentin Raoul Wilson. The comtesse had prepared everything, and for five hundred pounds had engaged an honest farmer's wife to bring the child up as her own, and, when old enough, have him taught a trade. Little Raoul was handed over to her a few hours after his birth. The good woman thought him the child of an English lady, and there seemed no probability that he would ever discover the secret of his birth. Restored to consciousness, Valentine asked for her child. She yearned to clasp it to her bosom; but the cruel comtesse was pitiless. "Your child!" she cried, "I do not know what you mean; you must be dreaming; you are mad!" And as Valentine persisted, she replied: "Your child is safe, and will want for nothing; let that suffice. You must forget what has happened, as you would forget a painful dream. The past must be wiped out forever. You know me well enough to understand that I mean to be obeyed."

The moment had come when Valentine ought in some degree to have resisted the comtesse's continually increasing tyranny. She had the idea, but not the courage to do so. If, on one side, she saw the dangers of almost culpable resignation—for she, too, was a mother!—on the other she felt crushed by the consciousness of her guilt. She yielded; and surrendered herself forever into the hands of a mother whose conduct she refrained from questioning, to escape the necessity of condemning it. So much suffering, so many regrets and internal struggles, for a long time delayed her recovery, but toward the end of June, the comtesse took her back to La Verberie. This time the mischief-makers and gossips were not so sharp as usual. The comtesse went about, complaining of the bad success of her trip to England, and was able to assure herself that no one suspected her real reason for the journey. Only one man, Dr. Raget, knew the truth; and, although Madame de la Verberie hated him from the bottom of her heart, she did him the justice to feel sure that he would not prove indiscreet.

Her first visit was paid to him. When he entered the room, she abruptly threw on the table the official documents which she had procured especially for this purpose. "These will prove to you, sir, that the child is living, and well cared for at a cost that I can ill afford."—"These are perfectly correct, madame," he replied, after an attentive examination of the

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papers, "and, if your conscience does not reproach you, of course I have nothing to say."—"My conscience reproaches me with nothing, sir."

The old doctor shook his head, and gazing searchingly into her eyes, retorted: "Can you say that you have not been harsh, even to cruelty?" She turned away her head, and, assuming her grand air, answered: "I have acted as a woman of my rank should act; and I am surprised to find in you an advocate of misconduct."

"Ah, madame," said the doctor, "it is your place to show kindness to the poor girl. What indulgence do you expect from strangers toward your unhappy daughter, when you, her mother, are so pitiless?"

Such plain spoken truths were more than the comtesse cared to hear, and she rose to leave. "Is that all that you have to say to me, Dr. Raget?" she asked haughtily. "Yes, madame; I have done. My only object was to spare you eternal remorse."

The good doctor was mistaken in his idea of Madame de la Verberie's character. She was utterly incapable of feeling remorse; but she suffered cruelly when her selfish vanity was wounded, or her comfort disturbed. She resumed her old mode of living, but, having disposed of a part of her income, found it difficult to make both ends meet. This furnished her with an inexhaustible text for complaint; and at every meal she reproached Valentine most unmercifully. She seemed to forget her own command, that the past should be buried in oblivion, and constantly recurred to it; a day seldom passed, without her saying to Valentine: "Your conduct has ruined us."

One day her daughter could not refrain from replying: "I suppose you would have forgiven me had it enriched us." But these revolts on Valentine's part were rare, although her life was a series of tortures inflicted with most refined cruelty. Even the memory of Gaston had become a suffering. Perhaps, discovering the uselessness of her sacrifice, of her courage, and her devotion to what she had considered her duty, she regretted not having followed him. What had become of him? Why had he not contrived to send her a letter, a word to let her know that he was still alive? He had sworn to return a rich man before three years had passed. Would he ever return? There was a risk in his returning under any circumstances. His disappearance had not put an end to the terrible affair at Tarascon. He was supposed to be dead; but, as there was no

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positive proof of his death, and his body could not be found, justice was compelled to listen to the clamor of public opinion. The case was brought before the assize court; and Gaston de Clameran was sentenced to several years' imprisonment. As to Louis de Clameran, no one knew positively what had become of him. Some people said he was leading a life of reckless extravagance at Paris. Informed of these facts by her faithful Mihonne, Valentine became more hopeless than ever. All her energy was gone, and she finally reached that state of passive resignation peculiar to people who are constantly oppressed.

In this miserable way four years passed since the fatal evening when Gaston had escaped in old Menoul's boat. Madame de la Verberie had spent these four years most unprofitably. Seeing that she could not live upon her income, and having too much false pride to sell her land, which was so badly managed that it did not even bring her in two per cent, she resigned herself to borrowing and spent her capital with her income. As in such matters, it is only the first step that costs; the comtesse soon made rapid strides, saying to herself, like the late Marquis de Clameran: "After me, the deluge!" She no longer thought of anything but taking her ease. She had frequent "at homes," and paid many visits to the neighboring towns of Nimes and Avignon; she sent to Paris for the most elegant toilets, and indulged her taste for good living. She allowed herself all the luxury that she had hoped to obtain by the acquisition of a rich son-in-law. Great sorrows require consolation! The first year after she returned from London she did not hesitate to treat herself to a horse; it was rather old, to be sure, but when harnessed to a second-hand carriage bought on credit at Beaucaire made quite a good appearance. She would quiet her conscience, which occasionally reproached her for this constant extravagance, by saying: "I am so unhappy!" The unhappiness was that this seeming luxury cost her dear, very dear. After having sold the rest of her bonds, the comtesse first mortgaged the estate of La Verberie and then the chateau itself. And in less than four years she owed more than forty thousand francs, and was unable even to pay the interest of her debt.

She was racking her mind to discover some means of escape from her difficulties, when chance came to her rescue. For some time a young engineer, employed in surveys along the

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Rhone, had made the village close to La Verberie the centre of his operations. Being handsome, agreeable, and of polished manners, he had been warmly welcomed by the neighboring society, and the comtesse frequently met him at the houses of her friends where she went to play cards of an evening. This young engineer was named Andre Fauvel. The first time he met Valentine he was struck by her beauty, and after once looking into her large, melancholy eyes, his admiration deepened into love, though he had not even spoken to her. He was well off; a splendid career was open to him; he was free; and he swore that Valentine should be his. It was to an old friend of Madame de la Verberie, as noble as a Montmorency and as poor as Job, that he first confided his matrimonial plans. With the precision of a graduate of the polytechnic school, he enumerated all his qualifications for being a model son-in-law. For a long time the old lady listened to him without interruption; but when he had finished she did not hesitate to tell him that his pretensions were most presumptuous. What! he, a man of no pedigree, a Fauvel, a common surveyor, to aspire to the hand of a La Verberie! After having enumerated all the superior advantages of that superior order of beings, the nobility, she condescended to take a common-sense view of the case, and said: "However, you may succeed. The poor comtesse owes money in every direction; scarcely a day passes without the bailiffs calling upon her; so that, you understand, if a rich suitor appeared, and agreed to her terms respecting the settlements—well, well, there is no knowing what might happen."

Andre Fauvel was young; the old lady's insinuations seemed to him odious. On reflection, however, when he had studied the character of the nobility of the neighborhood, who were rich in nothing but prejudices, he clearly saw that pecuniary considerations alone would be strong enough to induce the proud Comtesse de la Verberie to grant him her daughter's hand. This certainty ended his hesitations, and he turned his whole attention to devising a plan for presenting his claim. He did not find this an easy thing to accomplish. To go in quest of a wife with her purchase-money in his hand was repugnant to his feelings, and contrary to his ideas of delicacy. But he knew no one who could undertake the matter for him, and his love was strong enough to make him swallow his repugnance. The occasion so anxiously awaited, to explain his intentions, soon presented itself.

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One day as he entered a hotel at Beaucaire to dine, he saw Madame de la Verberie about to seat herself at the table. He blushed deeply, and asked permission to sit beside her, which was granted him with a most encouraging smile. Did the comtesse suspect the love of the young engineer? Had she been warned by her friend? Perhaps so. At any rate, without giving Andre time to gradually approach the subject weighing on his mind, she began to complain of the hard times, the scarcity of money, and the grasping meanness of the tradespeople. The truth is, she had come to Beaucaire to borrow money, and had found every cash-box closed against her; and her lawyer had advised her to sell her land for what it would bring. Anger, joined to that secret instinct of the situation of affairs which is the sixth sense of a woman, loosened her tongue, and made her more communicative to this comparative stranger than she had ever been to her bosom friends. She explained to him the horror of her situation, her present needs, her anxiety for the future, and, above all, her great distress at not being able to marry off her beloved daughter. Andre listened to these complaints with becoming commiseration, but in reality he was delighted. Without giving her time to finish her tale, he began to state what he called his view of the matter. He said that, although he sympathized deeply with the comtesse, he could not account for her uneasiness about her daughter. What? Could she be disturbed at having no dowry for her? Why, the rank and beauty of Mademoiselle Valentine were a fortune in themselves, of which any man might be proud. He knew more than one man who would esteem himself only too happy if Mademoiselle Valentine would accept his name, and confer upon him the sweet duty of relieving her mother from all anxiety and care. Finally, he did not think the situation of the comtesse's affairs nearly so desperate as she imagined. How much money would be necessary to pay off the mortgages upon La Verberie? About forty thousand francs, perhaps? Indeed! That was but a mere trifle. Besides, this sum would not be a gift from the son-in-law, but only a loan, because the estate would be his in the end, and greatly increased in value. A man, too, worthy of Valentine's love could never let his wife's mother want for the comforts and luxuries due to a lady of her age, rank, and misfortunes. He would be only to glad to offer her a sufficient income, not only to provide comfort, but even luxury.

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As Andre spoke in a tone too earnest to be assumed, it seemed to the comtesse that a celestial dew was dropping upon her pecuniary wounds. Her countenance was radiant with joy, her fierce little eyes beamed with the most encouraging tenderness, her thin lips were wreathed in the most friendly smiles. One thought alone disturbed the young engineer. "Does she understand me? Does she think I'm serious?" he wondered. She certainly did, as her subsequent remarks proved. "Alas!" she sighed, "forty thousand francs will not save La Verberie; the principal and interest of the debt amount to at least sixty thousand."

"Oh, either forty or sixty thousand is nothing worth speaking of."

"Then my son-in-law, the phenix we are supposing, would he have the forethought to provide for my requirements?"

"I should fancy he would be delighted to add four thousand francs to the income you derive from your estate."

The comtesse did not reply at once; she was calculating. "Four thousand francs is not much," she said after a pause. "Everything is so dear in this part of the country! But with six thousand francs—yes, six thousand francs would make me happy!"

The young man thought that her demands were becoming excessive, but, with the generosity of an ardent lover, he replied: "The son-in-law of whom we are speaking would not be very devoted to Mademoiselle Valentine if the paltry sum of two thousand francs caused him to hesitate."

"You promise too much!" murmured the comtesse. A sudden objection, however, occurred to her. "But this imaginary son-in-law," she remarked, "must be possessed of the means to fulfil his promises. I have my daughter's happiness too much at heart to give her to a man who did not produce—what do you call them?—securities, guarantees."

"Decidedly," thought Fauvel with mortification, "we are making a bargain." Then he added aloud: "Of course, your son-in-law would bind himself in the marriage contract to—"

"Never!—sir, never! Think of the impropriety of the thing! What would the world say?"

"Excuse me, it would be stated that it was the interest of a sum received from you."

"Ah! yes, that might do very well."

The comtesse insisted upon seeing Andre home in her car-

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riage. During the drive no definite plan was agreed upon between them; but they understood each other so well that, when the comtesse set the young engineer down at his own door, she invited him to dinner the next day, and held out her skinny hand, which Andre kissed with devotion as he thought of Valentine's pretty eyes. When Madame de la Verberie returned home, the servants were dumb with astonishment at her good humor; they had not seen her in this happy frame of mind for years. And her day's work was of a nature to elevate her spirits: she had been most unexpectedly raised from a very difficult position to affluence. "An annuity of six thousand francs," said she to herself, "and a thousand crowns from the estate, that makes nine thousand francs a year! My daughter will live in Paris after she is married, and I can go and see my dear children without expense." At this price she would have sold not only one but three daughters, if she had possessed them. But suddenly her blood ran cold at a sudden thought which crossed her mind: "Would Valentine consent?"

Her anxiety to set her mind at rest sent her straightway to her daughter's room. She found Valentine reading by the light of a flickering candle. "My daughter," she said abruptly, "a young man of whom I approve has demanded your hand in marriage, and I have promised it to him."

At this startling announcement, Valentine started up: "Impossible!" she murmured, "impossible!"

"And why, if you please?"

"Did you tell him, mother, what I am? Did you own—"

"Your past folly? No, thank heavens! and I hope you will have the good sense to keep silent on the subject."

Although Valentine's spirit was completely crushed by her mother's tyranny, her sense of honor revolted at the idea. "You certainly would not wish me to marry an honest man, mother, without confessing to him everything connected with the past? I could never practise a deception so base."

The comtesse felt very much like flying into a passion; but she knew that threats would be of no avail in this instance, where resistance would be a matter of conscience with her daughter. Instead of commanding, she entreated. "Poor child," she said, "my poor dear Valentine, if you only knew the dreadful state of our affairs you would not talk in this way. Your folly commenced our ruin; to-day it is complete. Do you know that our creditors threaten to turn us out of La Verberie? Then

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what will become of us, my poor child? Must I in my old age go begging from door to door? We are utterly lost, and this marriage is our only hope of salvation."

These tearful entreaties were followed by plausible arguments. The dear comtesse made use of strange and subtle theories. What she formerly regarded as a monstrous crime, she now spoke of as a peccadillo. According to her, girls in Valentine's position were to be met with every day. She could understand, she said, her daughter's scruples if there were any danger of the past being brought to light; but she had taken such precautions that there was no fear of that. Would it make her love her husband any the less? No. Would he be less happy? No. Then that being so, why hesitate? Shocked, bewildered, Valentine asked herself if this was really her mother, the haughty woman who had always been such a worshiper of honor and duty, who now contradicted every word she had uttered during her life! Valentine could not understand the sudden change. The comtesse's subtle arguments and shameful sophistry neither moved nor convinced her; but she had not the courage to resist the tearful entreaties of that mother, who ended by falling on her knees, and with clasped hands imploring her child to save her. Violently agitated, distracted by a thousand conflicting emotions, daring neither to refuse nor to promise, fearing the consequences of a decision thus forced from her, the unhappy girl begged her mother to grant her a few hours to reflect.

Madame de la Verberie dared not refuse this request, and acquiesced.

"I will leave you, my daughter," she said, "and I trust your heart will tell you how to decide between a useless confession and your mother's salvation." With these words she left the room, indignant but hopeful.

Placed between two obligations equally sacred, equally binding, but diametrically opposed, Valentine's troubled mind could no longer clearly discern the path of duty. Could she reduce her mother to want and misery? Could she basely deceive the confidence and love of an honorable man? However she decided, her future life would be one of suffering and remorse. Alas! why had she not a wise and kind adviser to point out the right course to pursue, and assist her in struggling against evil influences? Why had she not that gentle, discreet friend who had helped her in her first misfortunes, old Dr. Raget?

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Formerly, the memory of Gaston had been her guiding star; but now this far-off memory was nothing but a sort of vanishing dream. In romance we meet with heroines of life-long constancy; real life produces few such miracles. For a long time Valentine's mind had been filled with the image of Gaston. As the hero of her dreams, she dwelt fondly on his memory; but the mists of time had gradually dimmed the brilliancy of her idol, which was now no more than a cold relic at the bottom of her heart. When she arose the next morning, pale and weak from a sleepless, tearful night, she was almost resolved to confess everything; but when the evening came, and she found herself in the company of Andre Fauvel, and in the presence of her mother's alternately threatening and supplicating glances, her courage failed her. She would say to herself: "I will tell him." But later on she added: "I will wait till to-morrow." The comtesse saw all these struggles, but was not made uneasy by them. She knew by experience that when a painful duty is put off it is never performed. There was, perhaps, some excuse for Valentine in the horror of her situation. Perhaps, unknown to herself, she felt a faint hope arise within her. Any marriage, even an unhappy one, offered the prospect of a change, of a new life, a relief from the insupportable suffering she was then enduring. Sometimes, in her ignorance of human life, she imagined that time and close intimacy would make it almost easy for her to confess her terrible fault, and that Andre would pardon her and marry her all the same, since he loved her so much. That he sincerely loved her, she knew full well. It was not the impetuous passion of Gaston, with its excitements and terrors, but a calm, steady, and perhaps more lasting affection, obtaining a sort of blissful rest in its legitimacy and constancy.

Thus Valentine gradually became accustomed to Andre's presence, and was surprised into feeling very happy at the constant delicate attentions and affectionate looks that he lavished upon her. She did not feel any love for him yet; but a separation would have distressed her deeply. During the courtship, the comtesse's conduct was a masterpiece. She suddenly ceased arguing and importuning, and with tearful resignation said she would not attempt to influence her daughter's decision; but she went about sighing and groaning as if she were on the eve of starving to death. She also made arrangements for being tormented by the bailiffs. Distress-warrants and legal notices

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poured in at La Verberie, and she would show Valentine all these documents, saying: "God grant we may not be driven from the home of our ancestors before your marriage, my darling!" Knowing that her presence was sufficient to freeze any confession on her daughter's lips, she never left her alone with Andre. "Once married," she thought, "they can settle the matter to please themselves." She was as impatient as Andre, and hastened the preparations for the wedding. She gave Valentine no opportunity for reflection. She kept her constantly busy, either in driving to town to purchase some article of dress, or in paying visits.

At last the eve of the wedding-day found the comtesse hopeful, though oppressed with anxiety, like the gambler playing for a high stake. On this evening, for the first time, Valentine found herself alone with the man who was to become her husband. It was twilight, and she was sitting in the drawing-room, miserable and trembling, anxious to unburden her mind, when Andre entered. Seeing that she was agitated, he pressed her hand, and gently begged her to tell him the cause of her sorrow. "Am I not your best friend," he said, "and ought I not to be the confidant of your troubles, if you have any? Why these tears, my darling?"

At this moment she was on the point of confessing everything. But suddenly she perceived the scandal that would result, the pain she would cause Andre, and her mother's anger; she saw her own future life ruined—she exclaimed, like all young girls when the eventful moment draws near: "I am afraid." Imagining that she was merely disturbed by some vague fears, he tried to console and reassure her; but he was surprised to find that his affectionate words only seemed to increase her distress. But already Madame de la Verberie came to interrupt them: they were wanted to sign the marriage contract. Andre Fauvel was left in ignorance.

On the morrow, a lovely spring day, Andre Fauvel and Valentine de la Verberie were married at the village church. Early in the morning the chateau was filled with the bride's friends, who came, according to custom, to assist at her wedding toilet. Valentine forced herself to appear calm, even smiling; but her face was whiter than her veil—her heart was torn by remorse. She felt as though the sad truth were written upon her brow, and that her white dress was but a bitter irony, a galling humiliation. She shuddered when her most intimate

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friend placed the wreath of orange-blossoms upon her head. It seemed to her that this emblem of purity would burn her. It did not do so, but one of the wire stems of the flowers, badly covered, scratched her forehead, which bled a great deal, and a drop of blood fell upon her dress. What an evil omen! Valentine almost fainted. But presages are deceitful, as it proved with Valentine; for a year after her marriage she was, according to report, the happiest of wives. Happy! yes, she would have been completely so could she only have forgotten the past. Andre adored her. He had gone into business, and everything succeeded with him. But he wished to be immensely rich, not for himself, but for the wife he loved, whom he longed to surround with every luxury. Thinking her the most lovely, he wished to see her the most adorned.

Eighteen months after her marriage, Madame Fauvel had a son. But, alas! neither this child, nor a second son, born a year after, could make her forget the other one—the poor, forsaken babe whom, for a sum of money, a stranger had consented to receive. Loving her children passionately, and bringing them up like the sons of princes, she would murmur to herself: "Who knows if the abandoned one has even bread to eat?" If she had only known where he was; if she had only dared inquire!—but she was afraid. Sometimes, too, she would be uneasy about Gaston's jewels, constantly fearing that their hiding-place would be discovered. Other times she would say to herself: "I may as well be tranquil; misfortune has forgotten me." Poor deluded woman! Misfortune is a visitor who sometimes delays his visits, but always comes in the end.

XV

LOUIS DE CLAMERAN, the second son of the marquis, was one of those self-controlled men, who beneath a cool, careless manner, conceal a fiery temperament, and ungovernable passions. Apparently occupied in the pursuit of pleasure, this precocious hypocrite longed for a larger field in which to indulge his evil inclinations, secretly cursing the stern necessity

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which chained him down to this dreary country life, and the old chateau, which to him was more gloomy than a prison, and as lifeless as the grave. The paternal authority, though gently exercised, exasperated his rebellious temper. Louis did not love his father, and he hated his brother Gaston. The old marquis, in his culpable thoughtlessness, had kindled this burning envy in the heart of his second son. A strict observer of traditional rights, he had always declared that the eldest son of a noble house should inherit all the family possessions, and that he intended to leave Gaston his entire fortune. Gaston always said that he would never consent to profit by this paternal partiality, but would share equally with his brother. Judging others by himself, Louis placed no faith in this assertion, which he called an ostentatious affectation of generosity. Although this hatred was unsuspected by the marquis and Gaston, it was betrayed by acts significant enough to attract the attention of the servants. They were so fully aware of Louis's sentiments toward his brother that, when the latter was prevented from escaping because of the stumbling horse, they refused to believe it an accident, and muttered under their breath the word: "Fratricide!" A deplorable scene took place between Louis and Jean, who was allowed, on account of his fifty years' faithful service, to take liberties which he sometimes abused by making rough speeches to his superiors.

"It is a great pity," said the old servant, "that a skilful rider like yourself should have fallen at the very moment when your brother's safety depended upon your good horsemanship. La Verdure did not fall." At this broad insinuation, Louis turned pale, and threateningly exclaimed: "You insolent scoundrel, what do you mean?"—"You know well enough what I mean, sir," the old man replied significantly.—"I do not know! Explain yourself."

The servant only answered by a meaning look, which so incensed Louis that he rushed toward him with upraised whip, and would have beaten him unmercifully, had not the other servants interfered, and dragged Jean from the spot. This altercation occurred while Gaston was in the madder-field trying to escape his pursuers. After a while, the gendarmes and hussars returned, with slow tread and sad faces, and announced that Gaston de Clameran had plunged into the Rhone and was most certainly drowned. This melancholy news was received with groans and tears by every one save Louis, who remained

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calm and unmoved—not a single muscle of his face quivered: but his eyes sparkled with triumph. A secret voice cried within him: "Now you are assured of the family possessions, and a marquis's coronet."

The corporal of the gendarmes had said: "I would not be the one to tell the poor old man that his son is drowned." Louis felt none of the tender-hearted scruples of the brave old soldier. He instantly went to his father's sick-room, and said, in a firm voice: "Between disgrace and death, my brother has chosen: he is dead."

Like a sturdy oak stricken by lightning, the marquis tottered and fell when these fatal words sounded in his ears. The doctor soon arrived, but, alas! only to say that science was of no avail. Toward daybreak, Louis, without a tear, received his father's last sigh. Louis was now the master. All the unjust precautions taken by the marquis to elude the law, and ensure beyond dispute the possession of his entire fortune to his eldest son, turned against him. By means of a fraudulent deed of trust drawn by his dishonest lawyer, M. de Clameran had disposed everything so that, on the day of his death, every farthing he owned would be Gaston's. It was Louis who benefited by this precaution. He came into possession without even being called upon for the certificate of his brother's death. He was now Marquis de Clameran; he was free, he was comparatively rich. He who had never had twenty-five crowns in his pocket at a time, now found himself the possessor of close upon two hundred thousand francs. This sudden and most unexpected fortune so completely turned his head that he forgot his skilful dissimulation. His demeanor at the funeral of the marquis attracted general notice. He followed the coffin, with his head bowed down and his face buried in a handkerchief; but his looks belied him, his face was beaming, and one could trace a smile beneath the grimaces of his feigned grief. The day after the funeral, Louis sold off everything that could be disposed of—horses, carriages, and family plate. The next day he discharged all the old servants, who had hoped to end their days beneath the hospitable roof of Clameran. Several, with tears in their eyes, took him aside, and entreated him to let them stay, even without wages. He roughly ordered them to be gone. He sent for his father's lawyer, and gave him a power of attorney to sell the estate, and received in return the sum of twenty thousand francs as the first payment in advance. At

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