The Devil's Pool

by George Sand

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THE ROMANCISTS

GEORGE SAND

THE DEVIL'S POOL

Chapter V He saw my little Marie watching her three sheep on the common land.

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BIBLIOTHÈQUE

DES CHEFS-D'OEUVRE

DU ROMAN CONTEMPORAIN

THE DEVIL'S POOL

GEORGE SAND

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THIS EDITION OF

THE DEVIL'S POOL

HAS BEEN COMPLETELY TRANSLATED

BY

GEORGE B. IVES

THE ETCHINGS AND DRAWINGS ARE BY

EDMOND RUDAUX

NOTICE

When I began, with The Devil's Pool, a series of rustic pictures which I proposed to collect under the title of The Hemp-Beater's Tales, I had no theory, no purpose to effect a revolution in literature. No one can bring about a revolution by himself alone, and there are revolutions, especially in matters of art, which mankind accomplishes without any very clear idea how it is done, because everybody takes a hand in them. But this is not applicable to the romance of rustic manners: it has existed in all ages and under all forms, sometimes pompous, sometimes affected, sometimes artless. I have said, and I say again here: the dream of a country-life has always been the ideal of cities, aye, and of courts. I have done nothing new in following the incline that leads civilized man back to the charms of primitive life. I have not intended to invent a new language or to create a new style. I have been assured of the contrary in a large number of feuilletons, but I know better than any one what to think about my own plans, and I am always astonished that the critics dig so deep for them, when the simplest ideas, the most commonplace incidents, are the only inspirations to which the products of art owe their being. As for The Devil's Pool in particular, the incident that I have related in the preface, an engraving of Holbein's that had made an impression upon me, and a scene from real life that came under my eyes at the same moment, in sowing time,—those were what impelled me to write this modest tale, the scene of which is laid amid humble localities that I used to visit every day. If any one asks me my purpose in writing it, I shall reply that I desired to do a very simple and very touching thing, and that I have not succeeded as I hoped. I have seen, I have felt the beautiful in the simple, but to see and to depict are two different things! The most that the artist can hope to do is to induce those who have eyes to look with him. Therefore, my friends, look at simple things,

look at the sky and the fields and the trees and the peasants, especially at what is good and true in them: you will see them to a slight extent in my book, you will see them much better in nature.

GEORGE SAND.

NOHANT, April 12, 1851.

THE DEVIL'S POOL

I

THE AUTHOR TO THE READER

A la sueur de ton visaige Tu gagnerois ta pauvre vie, Après long travail et usaige, Voicy la mort qui te convie.[1]

The quatrain in old French written below one of Holbein's pictures is profoundly sad in its simplicity. The engraving represents a ploughman driving his plough through a field. A vast expanse of country stretches away in the distance, with some poor cabins here and there; the sun is setting behind the hill. It is the close of a hard day's work. The peasant is a short, thick-set man, old, and clothed in rags. The four horses that he urges forward are thin and gaunt; the ploughshare is buried in rough, unyielding soil. A single figure is joyous and alert in that scene of sweat and toil. It is a fantastic personage, a skeleton armed with a whip, who runs in the furrow beside the terrified horses and belabors them, thus serving the old husbandman as ploughboy. This spectre, which Holbein has introduced allegorically in the succession of philosophical and religious subjects, at once lugubrious and burlesque, entitled the Dance of Death, is Death itself.

In that collection, or rather in that great book, in which Death, playing his part on

every page, is the connecting link and the dominant thought, Holbein has marshalled sovereigns, pontiffs, lovers, gamblers, drunkards, nuns, courtesans, brigands, paupers, soldiers, monks, Jews, travellers, the whole world of his day and of ours; and everywhere the spectre of Death mocks and threatens and triumphs. From a single picture only, is it absent. It is that one in which Lazarus, the poor man, lying on a dunghill at the rich man's door, declares that he does not fear Death, doubtless because he has nothing to lose and his life is premature death.

Is that stoicist idea of the half-pagan Christianity of the Renaissance very comforting, and do devout souls find consolation therein? The ambitious man, the rascal, the tyrant, the rake, all those haughty sinners who abuse life, and whom Death holds by the hair, are destined to be punished, without doubt; but are the blind man, the beggar, the madman, the poor peasant, recompensed for their long life of misery by the single reflection that death is not an evil for them? No! An implacable melancholy, a ghastly fatality, overshadows the artist's work. It resembles a bitter imprecation upon the fate of mankind.

There truly do we find the grievous satire, the truthful picture of the society Holbein had under his eyes. Crime and misfortune, those are what impressed him; but what shall we depict, we artists of another age? Shall we seek in the thought of death the reward of mankind in the present day? Shall we invoke it as the punishment of injustice and the guerdon of suffering?

No, we have no longer to deal with Death, but with Life. We no longer believe either in the nothingness of the tomb or in salvation purchased by obligatory renunciation; we want life to be good because we want it to be fruitful. Lazarus must leave his dunghill, so that the poor may no longer rejoice at the death of the rich. All must be happy, so that the happiness of some may not be a crime and accursed of God. The husbandman as he sows his grain must know that he is working at the work of life, and not rejoice because Death is walking beside him. In a word, death

must no longer be the punishment of prosperity or the consolation of adversity. God did not destine death as a punishment or a compensation for life; for he blessed life, and the grave should not be a refuge to which it is permitted to send those who cannot be made happy.

Certain artists of our time, casting a serious glance upon their surroundings, strive to depict grief, the abjectness of poverty, Lazarus's dunghill. That may be within the domain of art and philosophy; but, by representing poverty as so ugly, so base, and at times so vicious and criminal a thing, do they attain their end, and is the effect as salutary as they could wish? We do not dare to say. We may be told that by pointing out the abyss that yawns beneath the fragile crust of opulence, they terrify the wicked rich man, as, in the time of the Danse Macabre, they showed him its yawning ditch, and Death ready to wind its unclean arms about him. To-day, they show him the thief picking his lock, the assassin watching until he sleeps. We confess that we do not clearly understand how they will reconcile him with the humanity he despises, how they will move his pity for the sufferings of the poor man whom he fears, by showing him that same poor man in the guise of the escaped felon and the burglar. Ghastly Death, gnashing his teeth and playing the violin in the productions of Holbein and his predecessors, found it impossible in that guise to convert the perverse and to comfort their victims. Is it not a fact that the literature of our day is in this respect following to some extent in the footsteps of the artists of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance?

Holbein's drunkards fill their glasses in a sort of frenzied desire to put aside the thought of Death, who, unseen by them, acts as their cup-bearer. The wicked rich men of to-day demand fortifications and cannon to put aside the thought of a rising of the Jacquerie, whom art shows them at work in the shadow, separately awaiting the moment to swoop down upon society. The Church of the Middle Ages answered the terrors of the powerful ones of the earth by selling indulgences. The government of to-day allays the anxiety of the rich by making them pay for many gendarmes and

jailers, bayonets and prisons.

Albert Dürer, Michael Angelo, Holbein, Callot, Goya, produced powerful satires upon the evils of their age and their country. They are immortal works, historical pages of unquestionable value; we do not undertake, therefore, to deny artists the right to probe the wounds of society and lay them bare before our eyes; but is there nothing better to be done to-day than to depict the terrifying and the threatening? In this literature of mysteries of iniquity, which talent and imagination have made fashionable, we prefer the mild, attractive figures to the villains for dramatic effect. The former may undertake and effect conversions, the others cause fear, and fear does not cure egoism, but increases it.

We believe that the mission of art is a mission of sentiment and love, that the novel of to-day ought to replace the parable and the fable of simpler times, and that the artist has a broader and more poetic task than that of suggesting a few prudential and conciliatory measures to lessen the alarm his pictures arouse. His object should be to make the objects of his solicitude lovable, and I would not reproach him for flattering them a little, in case of need. Art is not a study of positive reality, it is a quest for ideal truth, and the Vicar of Wakefield was a more useful and healthy book for the mind than the Paysan Perverti or the Liaisons Dangereuses.

Reader, pardon these reflections, and deign to accept them by way of preface. There will be no other to the little tale I propose to tell you, and it will be so short and so simple that I felt that I must apologize beforehand by telling you what I think of terrifying tales.

I allowed myself to be drawn into this digression apropos of a ploughman. It is the story of a ploughman that I set out to tell you, and will tell you forthwith.

II

THE PLOUGHING

I had been gazing for a long time and with profound sadness at Holbein's ploughman, and I was walking in the fields, musing upon country-life and the destiny of the husbandman. Doubtless it is a depressing thing to consume one's strength and one's life driving the plough through the bosom of the jealous earth, which yields the treasures of its fecundity only under duress, when a bit of the blackest and coarsest bread at the end of the day is the only reward and the only profit of such laborious toil. The wealth that covers the ground, the crops, the fruit, the proud cattle fattening on the long grass, are the property of a few, and the instruments of fatigue and slavery of the majority. As a general rule, the man of leisure does not love, for themselves, the fields, or the meadows, or the spectacle of nature, or the superb beasts that are to be converted into gold pieces for his use. The man of leisure comes to the country in search of a little air and health, then returns to the city to spend the fruit of his vassal's toil.

The man of toil, for his part, is too crushed, too wretched, and too frightened concerning the future, to enjoy the beauties of the landscape and the charms of rustic life. To him also the golden fields, the lovely meadows, the noble animals, represent bags of crowns, of which he will have only a paltry share, insufficient for his needs, and yet those cursed bags must be filled every year to satisfy the master and pay for the privilege of living sparingly and wretchedly on his domain.

And still nature is always young and beautiful and generous. She sheds poetry and beauty upon all living things, upon all the plants that are left to develop in their own way. Nature possesses the secret of happiness, and no one has ever succeeded in wresting it from her. He would be the most fortunate of men who, possessing the science of his craft and working with his hands, deriving happiness and liberty from the exercise of his intelligent strength, should have time to live in the heart and the brain, to understand his work, and to love the work of God. The artist has enjoyment

of that sort in contemplating and reproducing the beauties of Nature; but, when he sees the suffering of the men who people this paradise called the earth, the just, kind-hearted artist is grieved in the midst of his enjoyment. Where the mind, heart, and arms work in concert under the eye of Providence, true happiness would be found, and a holy harmony would exist between the munificence of God and the delights of the human soul. Then, instead of piteous, ghastly Death walking in his furrow, whip in hand, the painter of allegories could place beside the ploughman a radiant angel, sowing the blessed grain in the smoking furrows with generous hand.

And the dream of a peaceful, free, poetical, laborious, simple existence for the husbandman is not so difficult of conception that it need be relegated to a place among chimeras. The gentle, melancholy words of Virgil: "O how happy the life of the husbandman, if he but knew his happiness!" is an expression of regret; but, like all regrets, it is also a prediction. A day will come when the ploughman may be an artist, if not to express,—which will then matter but little, perhaps,—at all events, to feel, the beautiful. Do you believe that this mysterious intuition of poesy does not already exist within him in the state of instinct and vague revery? In those who have a little hoard for their protection to-day, and in whom excess of misery does not stifle all moral and intellectual development, pure happiness, felt and appreciated, is at the elementary stage; and, furthermore, if poets' voices have already arisen from the bosom of sorrow and fatigue, why should it be said that the work of the hands excludes the exercise of the functions of the mind? That exclusion is probably the general result of excessive toil and profound misery; but let it not be said that when man shall work only moderately and profitably, then there will be none but bad workmen and bad poets. He who derives noble enjoyment from the inward sentiment of poesy is a true poet, though he has never written a line in his life.

My thoughts had taken this course, and I did not notice that this confidence in man's capacity for education was strengthened in my mind by external influences. I was walking along the edge of a field which the peasants were preparing for the

approaching sowing. The field was an extensive one, like that in Holbein's picture. The landscape, too, was of great extent and framed in broad lines of verdure, slightly reddened by the approach of autumn, the lusty brown earth, where recent rains had left in some of the furrows lines of water which sparkled in the sun like slender silver threads. It was a blight, warm day, and the ground, freshly opened by the sharp ploughshares, exhaled a slight vapor. At the upper end of the field, an old man, whose broad back and stern face recalled the man in Holbein's picture, but whose clothing did not indicate poverty, gravely drove his old-fashioned areau, drawn by two placid oxen, with pale yellow hides, veritable patriarchs of the fields, tall, rather thin, with long, blunt horns, hard-working old beasts whom long companionship has made brothers, as they are called in our country districts, and who, when they are separated, refuse to work with new mates and die of grief. People who know nothing of the country call this alleged friendship of the ox for his yoke-fellow fabulous. Let them go to the stable and look at a poor, thin, emaciated animal, lashing his sunken sides with his restless tail, sniffing with terror and contempt at the fodder that is put before him, his eyes always turned toward the door, pawing the empty place beside him, smelling the yoke and chains his companion wore, and calling him incessantly with a pitiful bellow. The driver will say: "There's a yoke of oxen lost; his brother's dead, and he won't work. We ought to fatten him for killing; but he won't eat, and he'll soon starve to death."

The old ploughman was working slowly, in silence, without useless expenditure of strength. His docile team seemed in no greater hurry than he; but as he kept constantly at work, never turning aside, and exerting always just the requisite amount of sustained power, his furrow was as quickly cut as his son's, who was driving four less powerful oxen on some harder and more stony land a short distance away.

But the spectacle that next attracted my attention was a fine one indeed, a noble subject for a painter. At the other end of the arable tract, a young man of attractive

appearance was driving a superb team: four yoke of young beasts, black-coated with tawny spots that gleamed like fire, with the short, curly heads that suggest the wild bull, the great, wild eyes, the abrupt movements, the nervous, jerky way of doing their work, which shows that the yoke and goad still irritate them and that they shiver with wrath as they yield to the domination newly imposed upon them. They were what are called oxen freshly yoked. The man who was guiding them had to clear a field until recently used for pasturage, and filled with venerable stumps—an athlete's task which his energy, his youth, and his eight almost untamed beasts were hardly sufficient to accomplish.

A child of six or seven years, as beautiful as an angel, with a lamb's fleece covering his shoulders, over his blouse, so that he resembled the little Saint John the Baptist of the painters of the Renaissance, was trudging along in the furrow beside the plough and pricking the sides of the oxen with a long, light stick, the end of which was armed with a dull goad. The proud beasts quivered under the child's small hand, and made the yokes and the straps about their foreheads groan, jerking the plough violently forward. When the ploughshare struck a root, the driver shouted in a resonant voice, calling each beast by his name, but rather to soothe than to excite them; for the oxen, annoyed by the sudden resistance, started forward, digging their broad forked feet into the ground, and would have turned aside and dragged the plough across the field, had not the young man held the four leaders in check with voice and goad, while the child handled the other four. He, too, shouted, poor little fellow, in a voice which he tried to render terrible, but which remained as sweet as his angelic face. The whole picture was beautiful in strength and in grace: the landscape, the man, the child, the oxen under the yoke; and, despite the mighty struggle in which the earth was conquered, there was a feeling of peace and profound tranquillity hovering over everything. When the obstacle was surmounted and the team resumed its even, solemn progress, the ploughman, whose pretended violence was only to give his muscles a little practice and his vitality an outlet,

suddenly resumed the serenity of simple souls and cast a contented glance upon his child, who turned to smile at him. Then the manly voice of the young paterfamilias would strike up the solemn, melancholy tune which the ancient tradition of the province transmits, not to all ploughmen without distinction, but to those most expert in the art of arousing and sustaining the spirit of working-cattle. That song, whose origin was perhaps held sacred, and to which mysterious influences seem to have been attributed formerly, is reputed even to the present day to possess the virtue of keeping up the courage of those animals, of soothing their discontent, and of whiling away the tedium of their long task. It is not enough to have the art of driving them so as to cut the furrow in an absolutely straight line, to lighten their labor by raising the share or burying it deeper in the ground: a man is not a perfect ploughman if he cannot sing to his cattle, and that is a special science which requires special taste and powers.

To speak accurately, this song is only a sort of recitative, broken off and taken up again at pleasure. Its irregular form and its intonations, false according to the rules of musical art, make it impossible to reproduce. But it is a fine song none the less, and so entirely appropriate to the nature of the work it accompanies, to the gait of the ox, to the tranquillity of rural scenes, to the simple manners of the men who sing it, that no genius unfamiliar with work in the fields could have invented it, and no singer other than a cunning ploughman of that region would know how to render it. At the time of year when there is no other work and no other sign of activity in the country than the ploughing, that sweet and powerful chant rises like the voice of the breeze, which it resembles somewhat in its peculiar pitch. The final word of each phrase, sustained at incredible length, and with marvellous power of breath, ascends a fourth of a tone, purposely making a discord. That is barbarous, perhaps, but the charm of it is indescribable, and when one is accustomed to hear it, one cannot conceive of any other song at that time and in those localities that would not disturb the harmony.

It happened, therefore, that I had before my eyes a picture in striking contrast with Holbein's, although it might be a similar scene. Instead of a sad old man, a cheerful young man; instead of a team of thin, sorry horses, two yoke of four sturdy, spirited cattle; instead of Death, a lovely child; instead of an image of despair and a suggestion of destruction, a spectacle of energetic action and a thought of happiness.

Then it was that the French quatrain:

"A la sueur de ton visaige," etc.,

and the O fortunatos——agricolas of Virgil, came to my mind simultaneously, and when I saw that handsome pair, the man and the child, performing a grand and solemn task under such poetic conditions, and with so much grace combined with so much strength, I had a feeling of profound compassion mingled with involuntary respect. Happy the husbandman. Yes, so I should be in his place, if my arm should suddenly become strong and my chest powerful, so that they could thus fertilize nature and sing to her, without my eyes losing the power to see and my brain to understand the harmony of colors and sounds, the delicacy of tones, and the gracefulness of contours,—in a word, the mysterious beauty of things, and, above all, without my heart ceasing to be in relation with the divine sentiment that presided at the immortal and sublime creation.

But, alas! that man has never understood the mystery of the beautiful, that child will never understand it! God preserve me from the thought that they are not superior to the animals they guide, and that they have not at times a sort of ecstatic revelation that charms away their weariness and puts their cares to sleep! I see upon their noble brows the seal of the Lord God, for they are born kings of the earth much more truly than they who possess it, because they have paid for it. And the proof that they feel that it is so is found in the fact that you cannot expatriate them with impunity, and that they love the ground watered by the sweat of their brow, that the true peasant dies of homesickness in the uniform of the soldier, far from the fields where he was

born. But that man lacks a part of the enjoyments I possess, immaterial enjoyments to which he is abundantly entitled, he the workman in the vast temple which the heavens are vast enough to embrace. He lacks knowledge of his own sentiments. They who condemned him to servitude from his mother's womb, being unable to take from him the power of reverie, have taken the power of reflection.

Ah! well, such as he is, incomplete and doomed to never-ending childhood, he is nobler even so than he in whom knowledge has stifled sentiment. Do not place yourselves above him, you who consider yourselves endowed with the lawful and inalienable right to command him, for that terrible error proves that in you the mind has killed the heart and that you are the most incomplete and the blindest of men!—I prefer the simplicity of his mind to the false enlightenment of yours; and if I had to tell his life, it would be more pleasant for me to bring out its attractive and affecting aspects than it is creditable to you to depict the abject condition to which the scornful rigor of your social precepts may debase him.

I knew that young man and that beautiful child; I knew their story, for they had a story, everybody has his story, and everybody might arouse interest in the romance of his own life if he but understood it. Although a peasant and a simple ploughman, Germain had taken account of his duties and his affections. He had detailed them to me ingenuously one day, and I had listened to him with interest. When I had watched him at work for a considerable time, I asked myself why his story should not be written, although it was as simple, as straightforward, and as devoid of ornament as the furrow he made with his plough.

Next year that furrow will be filled up and covered by a new furrow. Thus the majority of men make their mark and disappear in the field of humanity. A little earth effaces it, and the furrows we have made succeed one another like graves in the cemetery. Is not the furrow of the ploughman as valuable as that of the idler, who has a name, however, a name that will live, if, by reason of some peculiarity or

some absurd exploit, he makes a little noise in the world?

So let us, if we can, rescue from oblivion the furrow of Germain, the cunning ploughman. He will know nothing about it, and will not be disturbed; but I shall have had a little pleasure in making the attempt.

III

PÈRE MAURICE

"Germain," his father-in-law said to him one day, "you must make up your mind to marry again. It's almost two years since you lost my daughter, and your oldest boy is seven years old. You're getting on toward thirty, my boy, and when a man passes that age, you know, in our province, he's considered too old to begin housekeeping again. You have three fine children, and thus far they haven't been a trouble to us. My wife and daughter-in-law have looked after them as well as they could, and loved them as they ought. There's Petit-Pierre, he's what you might call educated; he can drive oxen very handily already; he knows enough to keep the cattle in the meadow, and he's strong enough to drive the horses to water. So he isn't the one to be a burden to us; but the other two—we love them, God knows! poor innocent creatures!—cause us much anxiety this year. My daughter-in-law is about lying-in, and she still has a little one in her arms. When the one we expect has come, she won't be able to look after your little Solange, and especially your little Sylvain, who isn't four years old and hardly keeps still a minute day or night. His blood is hot, like yours: he'll make a good workman, but he's a terrible child, and my old woman can't run fast enough now to catch him when he runs off toward the ditch or in among the feet of the cattle. And then, when my daughter-in-law brings this other one into the world, her last but one will be thrown on my wife's hands for a month, at least. So your children worry us and overburden us. We don't like to see children neglected;

and when you think of the accidents that may happen to them for lack of watching, your mind's never at rest. So you must have another wife, and I another daughter-in-law. Think it over, my boy. I've already warned you more than once; time flies, and the years won't wait for you. You owe it to your children and to us, who want to have everything go right in the house, to marry as soon as possible."

"Well, father," the son-in-law replied, "if you really want me to do it, I must gratify you. But I don't propose to conceal from you that it will cause me a great deal of annoyance, and that I'd about as lief drown myself. You know what you've lost, and you don't know what you may find. I had an excellent wife, a good-looking wife, sweet and brave, good to her father and mother, good to her husband, good to her children, a good worker, in the fields or in the house, clever about her work, good at everything, in fact; and when you gave her to me, when I took her, it wasn't one of the conditions that I should forget her if I had the bad luck to lose her."

"What you say shows a good heart, Germain," rejoined Père Maurice; "I know you loved my daughter, that you made her happy, and that if you could have satisfied Death by going in her place, Catherine would be alive at this moment and you in the cemetery. She well deserved to have you love her like that, and if you don't get over her loss, no more do we. But I'm not talking about forgetting her. The good God willed that she should leave us, and we don't let a day pass without showing Him, by our prayers, our thoughts, our words, our acts, that we respect her memory and are grieved at her departure. But if she could speak to you from the other world and tell you her will, she would bid you seek a mother for her little orphans. The question, then, is to find a woman worthy to take her place. It won't be very easy; but it isn't impossible; and when we have found her for you, you will love her as you loved my daughter, because you are an honest man and because you will be grateful to her for doing us a service and loving your children."

"Very good, Père Maurice," said Germain, "I will do what you wish, as I always

have done."

"I must do you the justice to say, my son, that you have always listened to the friendship and sound arguments of the head of your family. So let us talk over the matter of your choice of a new wife. In the first place, I don't advise you to take a young woman. That isn't what you need. Youth is fickle; and as it's a burden to bring up three children, especially when they're the children of another marriage, what you must have is a kind-hearted soul, wise and gentle, and used to hard work. If your wife isn't about as old as yourself, she won't have sense enough to accept such a duty. She will think you too old and your children too young. She will complain, and your children will suffer."

"That is just what disturbs me," said Germain. "Suppose she should hate the poor little ones, and they should be maltreated and beaten?"

"God forbid!" said the old man. "But evil-minded women are rarer in these parts than good ones, and a man must be a fool not to be able to put his hand on the one that suits him."

"True, father: there are some good girls in our village. There's Louise and Sylvaine and Claudie and Marguerite—any one you please, in fact."

"Softly, softly, my boy, all those girls are too young or too poor—or too pretty; for we must think of that, too, my son. A pretty woman isn't always as steady as a plainer one."

"Do you want me to take an ugly one, pray?" said Germain, a little disturbed.

"No, not ugly, for you will have other children by her, and there's nothing so sad as to have ugly, puny, unhealthy children. But a woman still in her prime, in good health and neither ugly nor pretty, would do your business nicely."

"It is easy to see," said Germain, smiling rather sadly, "that to get such a one as you want we must have her made to order; especially as you don't want her to be poor, and rich wives aren't easy to get, especially for a widower."

"Suppose she was a widow herself, Germain? what do you say to a widow without children, and a snug little property?"

"I don't know of any just now in our parish."

"Nor do I, but there are other places."

"You have some one in view, father; so tell me at once who it is."

IV

GERMAIN, THE CUNNING PLOUGHMAN

"Yes, I have some one in view," replied Père Maurice. "It's one Léonard, widow of one Guérin, who lives at Fourche."

"I don't know the woman or the place," replied Germain, resigned, but becoming more and more depressed.

"Her name is Catherine, like your deceased wife's."

"Catherine? Yes, I shall enjoy having to say that name: Catherine! And yet, if I can't love her as well as I loved the other, it will cause me more pain than pleasure, for it will remind me of her too often."

"I tell you that you will love her: she's a good creature, a woman with a big heart; I haven't seen her for a long time, she wasn't a bad-looking girl then; but she is no longer young, she is thirty-two. She belongs to a good family, all fine people, and she has eight or ten thousand francs in land which she would be glad to sell, and buy other land where she goes to live; for she, too, is thinking of marrying again, and I know that, if her disposition should suit you, she wouldn't think you a bad match."

"So you have arranged it all?"

"Yes, subject to the judgment of you two; and that is what you must ask each other after you are acquainted. The woman's father is a distant relation of mine and has

been a very close friend. You know him, don't you—Père Léonard?"

"Yes, I have seen him talking with you at the fairs, and at the last one you breakfasted together: is this what you were talking about at such length?"

"To be sure; he watched you selling your cattle and thought you did the business very well, that you were a fine-appearing fellow, that you seemed active and shrewd; and when I told him all that you are and how well you have behaved to us during the eight years we've lived and worked together, without ever an angry or discontented word, he took it into his head that you must marry his daughter; and the plan suits me, too, I confess, considering the good reputation she has, the integrity of her family, and what I know about their circumstances."

"I see, Père Maurice, that you think a little about worldly goods."

"Of course I think about them. Don't you?"

"I will think about them, if you choose, to please you; but you know that, for my part, I never trouble myself about what is or is not coming to me in our profits. I don't understand about making a division, and my head isn't good for such things. I know about the land and cattle and horses and seed and fodder and threshing. As for sheep and vines and gardening, the niceties of farming, and small profits, all that, you know, is your son's business, and I don't interfere much in it. As for money, my memory is short, and I prefer to yield everything rather than dispute about thine and mine. I should be afraid of making a mistake and claiming what is not due me, and if matters were not simple and clear, I should never find my way through them."

"So much the worse, my son, and that's why I would like you to have a wife with brains to take my place when I am no longer here. You have never been willing to look into our accounts, and that might make trouble between you and my son, when you don't have me to keep the peace between you and tell you what is coming to each of you."

"May you live many years, Père Maurice! But don't you worry about what will

happen when you are gone; I shall never dispute with your son. I trust Jacques as I trust myself, and as I have no property of my own, as everything that can possibly come to me, comes to me as your daughter's husband and belongs to our children, I can be easy in my mind and so can you; Jacques would never try to defraud his sister's children for his own, as he loves them almost equally."

"You are right in that, Germain. Jacques is a good son, a good brother, and a man who loves the truth. But Jacques may die before you, before your children are grown up, and one must always have a care not to leave minors without a head to give them good advice and arrange their differences. Otherwise the lawyers interfere, set them at odds with each other, and make them eat everything up in lawsuits. So we ought not to think of bringing another person into our house, man or woman, without saying to ourselves that that person may some day have to direct the conduct and manage the business of thirty or more children, grandchildren, sons-in-law, and daughters-in-law. No one knows how much a family may grow, and when the hive is too full and the time has come to swarm, every one thinks about carrying off his honey. When I took you for my son-in-law, although my daughter was rich and you poor, I never reproached her for choosing you. I saw you were a good worker, and I knew well that the best sort of riches for country people like us is a good pair of arms and a heart like yours. When a man brings those things into a family, he brings enough. But it's different with a woman: her work in the house is to keep, not to get. Besides, now that you are a father and are looking for a wife, you must remember that your new children, having no sort of claim on the inheritance of your first wife's children, would be left in want if you should die, unless your wife had some property of her own. And then, it would cost something to feed the children you are going to add to our little colony. If that should fall on us alone, we would take care of them, never fear, and without complaining; but everybody's comfort would be diminished, and the first children would have to take their share of the privations. When families increase beyond measure, and their means do not increase in

proportion, then want comes, however bravely we may struggle against it. This is all I have to say, Germain; think it over, and try to make yourself agreeable to Widow Guérin; for her good management and her crowns will bring us aid for the present and peace of mind for the future."

"Very good, father. I will try to like her and make her like me."

"To do that you must go to see her."

"At her home? At Fourche? That's a long way, isn't it? and we don't have much time to run about at this season."

"When a marriage for love is on the carpet, you must expect to waste time; but when it's a marriage of convenience between two people who have no whims and who know what they want, it's soon arranged. Tomorrow will be Saturday; you can shorten your day's ploughing a bit and start about two o'clock, after dinner; you will be at Fourche by night; there's a good moon just now, the roads are excellent, and it isn't more than three leagues. Fourche is near Magnier. Besides, you can take the mare."

"I should rather go afoot in this cool weather."

"True, but the mare's a fine beast, and a suitor makes a better appearance if he comes well mounted. You must wear your new clothes and carry a nice present of game to Père Léonard. You will say that you come with a message from me, you will talk with him, you will pass the Sunday with his daughter, and you will return with a yes or a no on Monday morning."

"Very good," replied Germain calmly, and yet he was not altogether calm.

Germain had always lived a virtuous life, as hard-working peasants do. Married at twenty, he had loved but one woman in his life, and since he had become a widower, although he was naturally impulsive and vivacious, he had never laughed and dallied with any other. He had faithfully cherished a genuine regret in his heart, and he did not yield to his father-in-law without a feeling of dread and melancholy; but the

father-in-law had always managed his family judiciously, and Germain, who had devoted himself unreservedly to the common work, and consequently to him who personified it, the father of the family,—Germain did not understand the possibility of rebelling against sound arguments, against the common interest of all.

Nevertheless, he was sad. Few days passed that he did not weep for his wife in secret, and, although solitude was beginning to weigh upon him, he was more terrified at the thought of forming a new union, than desirous to escape from his grief. He said to himself vaguely that love might have consoled him if it had taken him by surprise, for love does not console otherwise. One cannot find it by seeking it; it comes to us when we do not expect it. This project of marriage, conceived in cold blood, which Père Maurice laid before him, the unknown fiancée, and, perhaps, even all the good things that were said of her common-sense and her virtue, gave him food for thought. And he went his way, musing as a man muses who has not enough ideas to fight among themselves; that is to say, not formulating in his mind convincing reasons for selfish resistance, but conscious of a dull pain, and not struggling against an evil which it was necessary to accept.

Meanwhile, Père Maurice had returned to the farm-house, while Germain employed the last hour of daylight, between sunset and darkness, in mending the breaches made by the sheep in the hedge surrounding a vineyard near the farm buildings. He raised the stalks of the bushes, and supported them with clods of earth, while the thrushes chattered in the neighboring thicket, and seemed to call to him to make haste, they were so curious to come to examine his work as soon as he had gone.

V

LA GUILLETTE

Père Maurice found in the house an elderly neighbor, who had come to have a chat

with his wife, and borrow some embers to light her fire. Mère Guillette lived in a wretched hovel within two gunshots of the farm. But she was a decent woman and a woman of strong will. Her poor house was neat and clean, and her carefully patched clothes denoted proper self-respect with all her poverty.

"You came to get some fire for the night, eh, Mère Guillette?" said the old man. "Is there anything else you would like?"

"No, Père Maurice," she replied; "nothing just now. I'm no beggar, you know, and I don't abuse my friends' kindness."

"That's the truth; and so your friends are always ready to do you a service."

"I was just talking with your wife, and I was asking her if Germain had at last made up his mind to marry again."

"You're no gossip," replied Père Maurice, "and one can speak before you without fear of people talking; so I will tell my wife and you that Germain has really made up his mind; he starts to-morrow for Fourche."

"Bless me!" exclaimed Mère Maurice; "the poor fellow! God grant that he may find a wife as good and honest as himself!"

"Ah! he is going to Fourche?" observed La Guillette. "Just see how things turn out! that helps me very much, and as you asked me just now, Père Maurice, if there was anything I wanted, I'll tell you what you can do to oblige me."

"Tell us, tell us, we shall be glad to oblige."

"I would like to have Germain take the trouble to take my daughter with him."

"Where? to Fourche?"

"Not to Fourche, but to Ormeaux, where she is going to stay the rest of the year."

"What!" said Mère Maurice, "are you going to part from your daughter?"

"She has got to go out to service and earn something. It comes hard enough to me and to her, too, poor soul! We couldn't make up our minds to part at midsummer; but

now Martinmas is coming, and she has found a good place as shepherdess on the farms at Ormeaux. The farmer passed through here the other day on his way back from the fair. He saw my little Marie watching her three sheep on the common land.—'You don't seem very busy, my little maid,' he said; 'and three sheep are hardly enough for a shepherd. Would you like to keep a hundred? I'll take you with me. The shepherdess at our place has been taken sick and she's going back to her people, and if you'll come to us within a week, you shall have fifty francs for the rest of the year, up to midsummer.'—The child refused, but she couldn't help thinking about it and telling me when she came home at night and found me sad and perplexed about getting through the winter, which is sure to be hard and long, for we saw the cranes and wild geese fly south this year a full month earlier than usual. We both cried; but at last we took courage. We said to each other that we couldn't stay together, because there's hardly enough to keep one person alive on our little handful of land; and then Marie's getting old—here she is nearly sixteen—and she must do as others do, earn her bread and help her poor mother."

"Mère Guillette," said the old ploughman, "if fifty francs was all that was needed to put an end to your troubles and make it unnecessary for you to send your daughter away, why, I would help you to find them, although fifty francs begins to mean something to people like us. But we must consult good sense as well as friendship in everything. If you were saved from want for this winter, you wouldn't be safe from future want, and the longer your daughter postpones taking the step, the harder it will be for you and for her to part. Little Marie is getting to be tall and strong, and she has nothing to do at home. She might fall into lazy habits—"

"Oh! as far as that goes, I'm not afraid," said Mère Guillette. "Marie's as brave as a rich girl at the head of a big establishment could be. She doesn't sit still a minute with her arms folded, and when we haven't any work, she cleans and rubs our poor furniture and makes every piece shine like a looking-glass. She's a child that's worth her weight in gold, and I'd have liked it much better to have her come to you as a

shepherdess instead of going so far away among people I don't know. You'd have taken her at midsummer if we could have made up our minds; but now you've hired all your help, and we can't think of it again until midsummer next year."

"Oh! I agree with all my heart, Guillette! I shall be very glad to do it. But, meanwhile, she will do well to learn a trade and get used to working for others."

"Yes, of course; the die is cast. The farmer at Ormeaux sent for her this morning; we said yes, and she must go. But the poor child doesn't know the way, and I shouldn't like to send her so far all alone. As your son-in-law is going to Fourche to-morrow, he can just as well take her. It seems that it's very near the farm she's going to, according to what they tell me; for I have never been there myself."

"They're right side by side, and my son-in-law will take her. That's as it should be; indeed, he can take her behind him on the mare, and that will save her shoes. Here he is, coming in to supper. I say, Germain, Mère Guillette's little Marie is going to Ormeaux as shepherdess. You'll take her on your horse, won't you?"

"Very well," said Germain, who was preoccupied, but always ready to do his neighbor a service.

In our world, it would never occur to a mother to entrust a daughter of sixteen to a man of twenty-eight! for Germain was really only twenty-eight, and although, according to the ideas of his province, he was considered an old man so far as marriage was concerned, he was still the handsomest man in the neighborhood. Work had not furrowed and wrinkled his face, as is the case with most peasants who have ten years of ploughing behind them. He was strong enough to plough ten more years without looking old, and the prejudice of age must have been very strong in a young girl's mind to prevent her remarking that Germain had a fresh complexion, a bright eye, blue as the heavens in May, ruddy lips, superb teeth, and a body as graceful and supple as that of a colt that has never left the pasture.

But chastity is a sacred tradition in certain country districts, far removed from the

corrupt animation of large cities, and Maurice's family was noted among all the families of Belair for uprightness, and fidelity to the truth. Germain was going in search of a wife; Marie was too young and too pure for him to think of her in that light, and, unless he was a heartless, bad man, it was impossible that he should have a guilty thought in connection with her. Père Maurice was in no way disturbed, therefore, to see him take the pretty girl en croupe; La Guillette would have considered that she was insulting him if she had requested him to respect her as his sister. Marie mounted the mare, weeping bitterly, after she had kissed her mother and her young friends twenty times over. Germain, who was also in a melancholy mood, had the more sympathy with her grief, and rode away with a grave face, while the neighbors waved their hands in farewell to poor Marie, with no thought of evil to come.

VI

PETIT-PIERRE

Grise was young and strong and handsome. She carried her double load easily, putting back her ears and champing her bit like the proud, high-spirited mare she was. As they rode by the long pasture, she spied her mother—who was called Old Grise, as she was called Young Grise—and neighed an adieu. Old Grise approached the fence, making her hopples ring, tried to leap over into the road to follow her daughter; then, seeing that she started off at a fast trot, she neighed in her turn, and stood looking after her, pensive and disturbed in mind, with her nose in the air, and her mouth filled with grass which she forgot to eat.

"The poor creature still knows her progeny," said Germain to divert little Marie's thoughts from her grief. "That makes me think that I didn't kiss my Petit-Pierre before I started. The bad boy wasn't there. Last night, he strove to make me promise

to take him along, and he cried a good hour in his bed. This morning again he tried everything to persuade me. Oh! what a shrewd, wheedling little rascal he is! but when he saw that it couldn't be, monsieur lost his temper: he went off into the fields, and I haven't seen him all day."

"I saw him," said Marie, trying to force back her tears. "He was running toward the woods with the Soulas children, and I thought it likely he had been away for some time, for he was hungry, and was eating wild plums and blackberries off the bushes. I gave him some bread from my luncheon, and he said: 'Thanks, my dear little Marie; when you come to our house, I'll give you some cake.' The little fellow is just too winning, Germain!"

"Yes, he is a winning child, and I don't know what I wouldn't do for him," the ploughman replied. "If his grandmother hadn't had more sense than I, I couldn't have kept from taking him with me when I saw him crying so hard that his poor little heart was all swollen."

"Well! why didn't you bring him, Germain? he wouldn't have been in the way; he's so good when you do what he wants you to."

"It seems that he would have been in the way where I am going. At least, that was Père Maurice's opinion.—For my part, I should have said, on the contrary, that we ought to see how he would be received, and that nobody could help taking kindly to such a dear child.—But they say at the house that I mustn't begin by exhibiting the burdens of the household.—I don't know why I talk to you about this, little Marie: you don't understand it."

"Yes, I do, Germain; I know you are going to get a wife; my mother told me, and bade me not mention it to any one, either at home or where I am going, and you needn't be afraid: I won't say a word."

"You will do well, for it isn't settled; perhaps I shan't suit the lady in question."

"We must hope you will, Germain. Pray, why shouldn't you suit her?"

"Who knows? I have three children, and that's a heavy load for a woman who isn't their mother!"

"That's true; but your children aren't like other children."

"Do you think so?"

"They are as beautiful as little angels, and so well brought up that you can't find more lovable children anywhere."

"There's Sylvain, he's not over good."

"He's very small! he can't be anything but terrible; but he's so bright!"

"True, he is bright: and such courage! he isn't a bit afraid of cows or bulls, and if I would permit him, he'd be climbing up on the horses with his older brother."

"If I had been in your place, I'd have brought the older one. Your having such a beautiful child would surely make her love you on the spot!"

"Yes, if the woman is fond of children; but suppose she doesn't like them?"

"Are there women who don't like children?"

"Not many, I think; but there are some, and that is what worries me."

"Then you don't know this woman at all?"

"No more than you do, and I am afraid I shall not know her any better after I have seen her. I am not suspicious. When any one says pleasant words to me, I believe them; but I have had reason to repent more than once, for words are not deeds."

"They say she's a fine woman."

"Who says so? Père Maurice?"

"Yes, your father-in-law."

"That's all right; but he doesn't know her, either."

"Well, you will soon see her; you will be very careful, and it's to be hoped you won't make any mistake, Germain."

"Look you, little Marie, I should be very glad if you would go into the house for a little while before going on to Ormeaux: you're a shrewd girl, you have always shown that you have a keen mind, and you notice everything. If you see anything that makes you think, you can quietly tell me about it."

"Oh! no, Germain, I wouldn't do that! I should be too much afraid of being mistaken; and, besides, if a word spoken thoughtlessly should disgust you with this marriage, your people would blame me for it, and I have enough troubles without bringing fresh ones on my poor dear mother's head."

As they were talking thus, Grise pricked up her ears and shied, then retraced her steps and approached the hedge, where there was something which had frightened her at first, but which she now began to recognize. Germain looked at the hedge and saw something that he took for a lamb in the ditch, under the branches of an oak still thick and green.

"It's a stray lamb," he said, "or a dead one, for it doesn't move. Perhaps some one is looking for it; we must see."

"It isn't a lamb," cried little Marie; "it's a child asleep; it's your Petit-Pierre."

"Upon my word!" exclaimed Germain, dismounting; "just see the little imp lying there asleep, so far from home, and in a ditch, where a snake might find him!"

He raised the child, who opened his eyes and smiled at him, saying, as he threw his arms around his neck:

"Little father, you're going to take me with you!"

"Oh, yes! still the same song! what were you doing there, naughty Pierre?"

"I was waiting for my little father to pass; I was looking out on the road, and I looked so hard I went to sleep."

"And if I had passed without seeing you, you would have stayed out all night and the wolf would have eaten you!"

"Oh! I knew you'd see me!" rejoined Petit-Pierre confidently.

"Well, kiss me now, Pierre, bid me good-by, and run back to the house if you don't want them to have supper without you."

"Why, ain't you going to take me with you?" cried the child, beginning to rub his eyes to show that he proposed to weep.

"You know grandpa and grandma don't approve of it," said Germain, taking refuge behind the authority of the old people, like one who places but slight reliance on his own.

But the child heard nothing. He began to cry in good earnest, saying that as long as his father took little Marie, he could take him too. He was told that they would have to go through great forests, that there were many wicked animals there that ate little children, that Grise would not carry three, that she said so when they started, and that in the country they were going to there was no bed or supper for little monkeys. All these excellent reasons did not convince Petit-Pierre; he threw himself on the grass and rolled about, crying that his father did not love him, and that, if he refused to take him with him, he would not go back to the house day or night.

Germain's fatherly heart was as soft and weak as a woman's. His wife's death, the care he had been compelled to bestow upon his little ones, together with the thought that the poor motherless children needed to be dearly loved, had combined to make it so, and such a hard struggle took place within him, especially as he was ashamed of his weakness, and tried to conceal his distress from little Marie, that the perspiration stood out on his forehead and his eyes were bordered with red as if they, too, were all ready to shed tears. Finally, he tried to be angry; but as he turned to little Marie, as if to call her to witness his firmness of will, he saw that the dear girl's face was bathed in tears, and, all his courage deserting him, it was impossible for him to keep back his own, although he continued to scold and threaten.

"Really, your heart is too hard," said little Marie at last, "and for my part, I could

never hold out like that against a child who is so unhappy. Come, Germain, take him along. Your mare is used to carrying two grown people and a child, for your brother-in-law and his wife, who is much heavier than I am, go to market every Saturday, with their boy, on the honest creature's back. You can put him up in front of you; indeed, I'd rather go all alone on foot than make the little fellow suffer so."

"Don't be disturbed about that," said Germain, who was dying with anxiety to be persuaded. "Grise is strong, and would carry two more if there was room on her backbone. But what shall we do with the child on the way? he will be cold and hungry—and who will look after him to-night and to-morrow, put him to bed, wash him and dress him? I don't dare put that trouble on a woman whom I don't know, and who will think, I have no doubt, that I stand very little on ceremony with her for a beginning."

"According to the good-will or annoyance she shows, you will be able to judge her at once, Germain, believe me; and at all events, if she doesn't take to your Pierre, I will take charge of him. I will go to her house to dress him, and I'll take him into the fields to-morrow. I'll amuse him all day, and see that he has all he needs."

"And he'll tire you out, my poor girl! He'll be a burden to you! a whole day—that's a long while!"

"On the contrary, I shall enjoy it; he will be company for me, and make me less unhappy the first day I shall have to pass in a new country. I shall fancy I am still at home."

The child, seeing that little Marie was taking his part, had clung to her skirt and held it so tight that she would have had to hurt him to take it away. When he saw that his father was yielding, he took Marie's hand in both his little sunburned ones and kissed it, leaping for joy, and pulling her toward the mare with the burning impatience that children show in all their desires.

"Well, well," said the girl, taking him in her arms, "we must try to soothe this poor

heart that is jumping like a little bird's, and if you feel cold when night comes, my Pierre, just tell me, and I'll wrap you in my cloak. Kiss your little father, and ask him to forgive you for being such a bad boy. Tell him that it shall never happen again! never, do you hear?"

"Yes, yes, on condition that I always do what he wants me to, eh?" said Germain, wiping the little fellow's eyes with his handkerchief. "Ah! Marie, you will spoil the rascal for me!—And really, little Marie, you're too good. I don't know why you didn't come to us as shepherdess last midsummer. You could have taken care of my children, and I would rather have paid you a good price for waiting on them than go in search of a wife who will be very likely to think that she's doing me a great favor by not detesting them."

Chapter VI He raised the child, who opened his eyes and smiled at him, saying, as he threw his arms around his neck. "Little father, you are going to take me with you!"

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"You mustn't look on the dark side of things like that," replied little Marie, holding the rein while Germain placed his son on the front of the heavy goat-skin-covered saddle; "if your wife doesn't like children, you can hire me next year, and I'll amuse them so well that they won't notice anything, never you fear."

VII

ON THE MOOR

"By the way," said Germain, when they had ridden on a short distance, "what will

they think at home when this little man doesn't appear? The old people will be anxious, and they will scour the country for him."

"You can tell the man working on the road yonder that you have taken him with you, and send him back to tell your people."

"True, Marie, you think of everything! It didn't even occur to me that Jeannie would be in this neighborhood."

"He lives close to the farm, too: he won't fail to do your errand."

When they had taken that precaution, Germain started the mare off at a trot, and Petit Pierre was so overjoyed that he did not notice at first that he had not dined; but as the rapid movement of the horse dug a pit in his stomach, he began, after a league or more, to yawn and turn pale, and at last confessed that he was dying of hunger.

"Now he's beginning," said Germain. "I knew that we shouldn't go far before monsieur would cry from hunger or thirst."

"I'm thirsty, too!" said Petit-Pierre.

"Well, we will go to Mère Rebec's wine-shop at Corlay, at the sign of the Break of Day. A fine sign, but a poor inn! Come, Marie, you will drink a finger of wine too."

"No, no, I don't need anything," she said, "I'll hold the mare while you go in with the little one."

"But now I think of it, my dear girl, you gave the bread you had for your luncheon to my Pierre, and you haven't had anything to eat; you refused to dine with us at the house, and did nothing but weep."

"Oh! I wasn't hungry, I was too sad! and I promise you that I haven't the slightest desire to eat now."

"We must force you to, little one; otherwise you'll be sick. We have a long way to go, and we mustn't arrive there half-starved, and ask for bread before we say good-day. I propose to set you the example, although I'm not very hungry; but I shall

make out to eat, considering that I didn't dine very well, either. I saw you and your mother weeping, and it made my heart sick. Come, come, I will tie Grise at the door; get down, I insist upon it."

All three entered Mere Rebec's establishment, and in less than a quarter of an hour the stout, limping hostess succeeded in serving them an omelet of respectable appearance with brown-bread and light wine.

Peasants do not eat quickly, and Petit-Pierre had such an enormous appetite that nearly an hour passed before Germain could think of renewing their journey. Little Marie ate to oblige at first; then her appetite came, little by little; for at sixteen one cannot fast long, and the country air is an imperious master. The kind words Germain said to her to comfort her and give her courage also produced their effect; she made an effort to persuade herself that seven months would soon be passed, and to think how happy she would be to be at home once more, in her own village, since Père Maurice and Germain were agreed in promising to take her into their service. But as she was beginning to brighten up and play with Petit-Pierre, Germain conceived the unfortunate idea of telling her to look out through the wine-shop window at the lovely view of the valley, which they could see throughout its whole length from that elevation, laughing and verdant and fertile. Marie looked, and asked if they could see the houses at Belair from there.

"To be sure," replied Germain, "and the farm, and your house too. Look, that little gray speck, not far from the great poplar at Godard, just below the church-spire."

"Ah! I see it," said the girl; and thereupon she began to weep again.

"I did wrong to remind you of that," said Germain, "I keep doing foolish things to-day! Come, Marie, my girl, let's be off; the days are short, and when the moon comes up, an hour from now, it won't be warm."

They resumed their journey, and rode across the great heath, and as Germain did not urge the mare, in order not to fatigue the girl and the child by a too rapid gait, the

sun had set when they left the road to enter the woods.

Germain knew the road as far as Magnier; but he thought that he could shorten it by not taking the avenue of Chanteloube, but going by Presles and La Sépulture, a route which he was not in the habit of taking when he went to the fair. He went astray and lost a little more time before entering the woods; even then he did not enter at the right place, and failed to discover his mistake, so that he turned his back to Fourche and headed much farther up, in the direction of Ardentes.

He was prevented then from taking his bearings by a mist which came with the darkness, one of those autumn evening mists which the white moonlight makes more vague and more deceptive. The great pools of water which abound in the clearings exhaled such dense vapor that when Grise passed through them, they only knew it by the splashing of her feet and the difficulty she had in pulling them out of the mud.

When they finally found a straight, level path, and had ridden to the end of it, Germain, upon endeavoring to ascertain where he was, realized that he was lost; for Père Maurice, in describing the road, had told him that, on leaving the woods, he would have to descend a very steep hill, cross a very large meadow, and ford the river twice. He had advised him to be cautious about riding into the river, because there had been heavy rains at the beginning of the season, and the water might be a little high. Seeing no steep hill, no meadow, no river, but the level moor, white as a sheet of snow, Germain drew rein, looked about for a house, waited for some one to pass, but saw nothing to give him any information. Thereupon he retraced his steps, and rode back into the woods. But the mist grew denser, the moon was altogether hidden, the roads were very bad, the ruts deep. Twice Grise nearly fell; laden as she was, she lost courage, and although she retained sufficient discernment to avoid running against trees, she could not prevent her riders from having to deal with huge branches which barred the road at the level of their heads and put them in great

danger. Germain lost his hat in one of these encounters, and had great difficulty in finding it. Petit-Pierre had fallen asleep, and, lying back like a log, so embarrassed his father's arms that he could not hold the mare up or guide her.

"I believe we're bewitched," said Germain, drawing rein once more: "for these woods aren't big enough for a man to lose himself in unless he's drunk, and here we have been riding round and round for two hours, unable to get out of them. Grise has only one idea in her head, and that is to go back to the house, and she was the one that made me go astray. If we want to go home, we have only to give her her head. But when we may be within two steps of the place where we are to spend the night, we should be mad to give up finding it, and begin such a long ride over again. But I don't know what to do. I can't see either the sky or the ground, and I am afraid this child will take the fever if we stay in this infernal fog, or be crushed by our weight if the horse should fall forward."

"We mustn't persist in riding any farther," said little Marie. "Let's get down, Germain; give me the child; I can carry him very well, and keep him covered up with the cloak better than you can. You can lead the mare, and perhaps we shall see better when we're nearer the ground."

That expedient succeeded only so far as to save them from a fall, for the fog crawled along the damp earth and seemed to cling to it. It was very hard walking, and they were so exhausted by it that they stopped when they at last found a dry place under some great oaks. Little Marie was drenched, but she did not complain or seem disturbed. Thinking only of the child, she sat down in the sand and took him on her knees, while Germain explored the neighborhood after throwing Grise's rein over the branch of a tree.

But Grise, who was thoroughly disgusted with the journey, jumped back, released the reins, broke the girths, and, kicking up her heels higher than her head some half-dozen times, by way of salutation, started off through the brush, showing very

plainly that she needed no one's assistance in finding her way.

"Well, well," said Germain, after he had tried in vain to catch her, "here we are on foot, and it would do us no good if we should find the right road, for we should have to cross the river on foot; and when we see how full of water these roads are, we can be sure that the meadow is under water. We don't know the other fords. So we must wait till the mist rises; it can't last more than an hour or two. When we can see, we will look for a house, the first one we can find on the edge of the wood; but at present we can't stir from here; there's a ditch and a pond and I don't know what not in front of us; and I couldn't undertake to say what there is behind us, for I don't know which way we came."

VIII

UNDER THE GREAT OAKS

"Oh! well, Germain, we must be patient," said little Marie. "We are not badly off on this little knoll. The rain doesn't come through the leaves of these great oaks, for I can feel some old broken branches that are dry enough to burn. You have flint and steel, Germain? You were smoking your pipe just now."

"I had them. My steel was in the bag on the saddle with the game I was carrying to my intended; but the cursed mare carried off everything, even my cloak, which she will lose or tear on all the branches." "Oh! no, Germain; the saddle and cloak and bag are all there on the ground, by your feet. Grise broke the girths and threw everything off when she left."

"Great God, that's so!" said the ploughman; "and if we can feel round and find a little dead wood, we can succeed in drying and warming ourselves."

"That's not hard to do," said little Marie; "the dead wood cracks under your feet

wherever you step; but give me the saddle first."

"What are you going to do with it?"

"Make a bed for the little one: no, not like that; upside-down, so he won't roll out; and it's still warm from the mare's back. Prop it up on each side with those stones you see there."

"I don't see them! Your eyes are like a cat's, aren't they?"

"There! now that's done, Germain! Give me your cloak to wrap up his little feet, and I'll put mine over his body. Look! isn't he as comfortable there as he would be in his bed? and feel how warm he is!"

"Yes, indeed! you know how to take care of children, Marie!"

"That doesn't take much magic. Now look for your steel in your bag, and I'll fix the wood."

"That wood will never light, it's too damp."

"You doubt everything, Germain! Why, can't you remember taking care of sheep and making big fires in the fields when it was raining hard?"

"Yes, that's a knack that children who tend sheep have; but I've been an ox-driver ever since I knew how to walk."

"That's how you came to be stronger in your arms than clever with your hands. There's your fire all built; now you'll see if it won't burn! Give me the fire and a few dry ferns. Good! now blow; you're not weak-lunged, are you?"

"Not that I know of," said Germain, blowing like a forge-bellows. In a moment, the flame shot up, cast a red light at first, and finally rose in bluish flashes under the branches of the oaks, struggling with the mist, and gradually drying the atmosphere for ten feet around.

"Now, I'll sit down beside the little one and see that no sparks fall on him," said the girl. "You must throw on wood and keep the fire bright, Germain! we shall not catch

cold or the fever here, I promise you."

"Faith, you're a smart girl," said Germain, "and you can make a fire like a little witch. I feel like a new man, and my courage is coming back to me; for, with my legs wet to the knees, and the prospect of staying here till daybreak in that condition, I was in a very bad humor just now."

"And when one is in a bad humor, one never thinks of anything," rejoined little Marie.

"And are you never in a bad humor, pray?"

"Oh! no, never! What's the use?"

"Why, it's of no use, that's certain; but how can you help it, when you have things to annoy you? God knows that you have plenty of them, poor child; for you haven't always been happy!"

"True, my poor mother and I have suffered. We have been unhappy, but we never lost courage."

"I wouldn't lose courage for any work that ever was," said Germain; "but poverty would grieve me, for I have never lacked anything. My wife made me rich, and I am rich still; I shall be as long as I work at the farm: that will be always, I hope; but every one has his own troubles! I have suffered in another way."

"Yes, you lost your wife, and it was a great pity!"

"Wasn't it?"

"Oh! I cried bitterly for her, Germain, I tell you! for she was so kind! But let's not talk about her any more or I shall cry again; all my sorrows seem to be coming back to me to-day."

"Indeed, she loved you dearly, little Marie; she thought a deal of you and your mother. What! you are crying! Come, come, my girl, I don't want to cry, you know—"

"But you are crying, Germain! You are crying, too! Why should a man be ashamed to cry for his wife? Cry on, don't mind me! I share that grief with you!"

"You have a kind heart, Marie, and it does me good to weep with you. But put your feet near the fire; your skirts are all damp, too, poor little girl! Let me take your place by the child, and do you warm yourself better than that."

"I'm warm enough," said Marie; "if you want to sit down, take a corner of the cloak; I am very comfortable."

"To tell the truth, we're not badly off here," said Germain, seating himself close beside her. "The only thing that troubles me now is hunger. It must be nine o'clock, and I had such hard work walking in those wretched roads, that I feel all fagged out. Aren't you hungry, too, Marie?"

"I? Not at all. I'm not used to four meals a day as you are, and I have been to bed without supper so many times, that once more doesn't worry me much."

"Well, a wife like you is a great convenience; she doesn't cost much," said Germain, with a smile.

"I am not a wife," said Marie artlessly, not perceiving the turn the ploughman's ideas were taking. "Are you dreaming?"

"Yes, I believe I am dreaming," was Germain's reply; "perhaps it's hunger that makes my mind wander."

"What a gourmand you must be!" she rejoined, brightening up a little in her turn; "well, if you can't live five or six hours without eating, haven't you some game in your bag, and fire to cook it with?"

"The devil! that's a good idea! but what about the gift to my future father-in-law?"

"You have six partridges and a hare! I don't believe you need all that to satisfy your hunger, do you?"

"But if we undertake to cook it here, without a spit or fire-dogs, we shall burn it to a

cinder!"

"Oh! no," said little Marie; "I'll agree to cook it for you in the ashes so it won't smell of smoke. Didn't you ever catch larks in the fields, and haven't you cooked them between two stones? Ah! true! I forget that you never tended sheep! Come, pluck that partridge! Not so hard! you'll pull off the skin!"

"You might pluck another one to show me how!"

"What! do you propose to eat two? What an ogre! Well, there they are all plucked, and now I'll cook them."

"You would make a perfect cantinière, little Marie; but unluckily you haven't any canteen, and I shall be reduced to drink water from this pool."

"You'd like some wine, wouldn't you? Perhaps you need coffee, too? you imagine you're at the fair under the arbor! Call the landlord: liquor for the cunning ploughman of Belair!"

"Ah! bad girl, you're laughing at me, are you? You wouldn't drink some wine, I suppose, if you had some?"

"I? I drank with you to-night at La Rebec's for the second time in my life; but if you'll be very good, I will give you a bottle almost full, and of good wine too!"

"What, Marie, are you really a magician?"

"Weren't you foolish enough to order two bottles of wine at La Rebec's? You drank one with the boy, and I took barely three drops out of the one you put before me. But you paid for both of them without looking to see."

"Well?"

"Well, I put the one you didn't drink in my basket, thinking that you or the little one might be thirsty on the way; and here it is."

"You are the most thoughtful girl I ever saw. Well, well! the poor child was crying when we left the inn, but that didn't prevent her from thinking more of others than

herself! Little Marie, the man who marries you will be no fool."

"I hope not, for I shouldn't like a fool. Come, eat your partridges, they are cooked to a turn; and, having no bread, you must be satisfied with chestnuts."

"And where the devil did you get chestnuts?"

"That's wonderful, certainly! why, all along the road, I picked them from the branches as we passed, and filled my pockets with them."

"Are they cooked, too?"

"What good would my wits do me if I hadn't put some chestnuts in the fire as soon as it was lighted? We always do that in the fields."

"Now, little Marie, we will have supper together! I want to drink your health and wish you a good husband—as good as you would wish yourself. Tell me what you think about it!"

"I should have hard work, Germain, for I never yet gave it a thought."

"What! not at all? never?" said Germain, falling to with a ploughman's appetite, but cutting off the best pieces to offer his companion, who obstinately refused them, and contented herself with a few chestnuts. "Tell me, little Marie," he continued, seeing that she did not propose to reply, "haven't you ever thought about marrying? you're old enough, though!"

"Perhaps I am," she said; "but I am too poor. You need at least a hundred crowns to begin housekeeping, and I shall have to work five or six years to save that much."

"Poor girl! I wish Pere Maurice would let me have a hundred crowns to give you."

"Thank you very much, Germain. What do you suppose people would say about me?"

"What could they say? everybody knows that I'm an old man and can't marry you. So they wouldn't imagine that I—that you—"

"Look, ploughman! here's your son waking up," said little Marie.

IX

THE EVENING PRAYER

Petit-Pierre had sat up, and was looking all about with a thoughtful expression.

"Ah! the rascal never does anything else when he hears anybody eating!" said Germain; "a cannon-shot wouldn't wake him, but move your jaws in his neighborhood, and he opens his eyes at once."

"You must have been like that at his age," said little Marie, with a mischievous smile. "Well, my little Pierre, are you looking for the top of your cradle? It's made of green leaves to-night, my child; but your father's having his supper, all the same. Do you want to sup with him? I haven't eaten your share; I thought you would probably claim it!"

"Marie, I insist on your eating," cried the ploughman; "I shan't eat any more. I am a glutton, a boor; you go without on our account, and it's not right; I'm ashamed of myself. It takes away my appetite, I tell you; I won't let my son have any supper unless you take some."

"Let us alone," replied little Marie, "you haven't the key to our appetites. Mine is closed to-day, but your Pierre's is wide open, like a little wolf's. Just see how he goes at it! Oh! he'll be a sturdy ploughman, too!"

In truth, Petit-Pierre soon showed whose son he was, and, although he was hardly awake and did not understand where he was or how he came there, he began to devour. Then, when his hunger was appeased, being intensely excited as children generally are when their regular habits are interrupted, he exhibited more quick wit, more curiosity, and more shrewdness than usual. He made them tell him where he was, and when he learned that he was in the middle of a forest, he was a little afraid.

"Are there naughty beasts in this forest?" he asked his father.

"No, there are none at all," was the reply. "Don't be afraid."

"Then you lied when you told me that the wolves would carry me off if I went through the big forest with you?"

"Do you hear this reasoner?" said Germain in some embarrassment.

"He is right," replied little Marie, "you told him that; he has a good memory, and he remembers it. But you must understand, my little Pierre, that your father never lies. We passed the big forest while you were asleep, and now we're in the little forest, where there aren't any naughty beasts."

"Is the little forest very far from the big one?"

"Pretty far; and then the wolves never leave the big forest. Even if one should come here, your father would kill him."

"And would you kill him, too, little Marie?"

"We would all kill him, for you would help us, my Pierre, wouldn't you? You're not afraid, I know. You would hit him hard!"

"Yes, yes," said the child, proudly, assuming a heroic attitude, "we would kill 'em."

"There's no one like you for talking to children," said Germain to little Marie, "and for making them hear reason. To be sure, it isn't long since you were a child yourself, and you remember what your mother used to say to you. I believe that the younger one is, the better one understands the young. I am very much afraid that a woman of thirty, who doesn't know what it is to be a mother, will find it hard to learn to prattle and reason with young brats."

"Why so, Germain? I don't know why you have such a bad idea of this woman; you'll get over it!"

"To the devil with the woman!" said Germain. "I would like to go home and never come back here. What do I need of a woman I don't know!"

"Little father," said the child, "why do you keep talking about your wife to-day,

when she is dead?"

"Alas! you haven't forgotten your poor dear mother, have you?"

"No, for I saw them put her in a pretty box of white wood, and my grandma took me to her to kiss her and bid her good-by!—She was all white and cold, and every night my aunt tells me to pray to the good Lord to let her get warm with Him in heaven. Do you think she's there now?"

"I hope so, my child; but you must keep on praying: that shows your mother that you love her."

"I am going to say my prayer," replied the child; "I did not think of saying it this evening. But I can't say it all by myself; I always forget something. Little Marie must help me."

"Yes, Pierre, I will help you," said the girl. "Come, kneel here by my side."

The child knelt on the girl's skirt, clasped his little hands, and began to repeat his prayer with interest and fervently at first, for he knew the beginning very well; then more slowly and hesitatingly, and at last repeating word for word what Marie dictated to him, when he reached that point in his petition beyond which he had never been able to learn, as he always fell asleep just there every night. On this occasion, the labor of paying attention and the monotony of his own tones produced their customary effect, so that he pronounced the last syllables only with great effort, and after they had been repeated three times; his head grew heavy, and fell against Marie's breast: his hands relaxed, separated, and fell open upon his knees. By the light of the camp-fire, Germain looked at his little angel nodding against the girl's heart, while she, holding him in her arms and warming his fair hair with her sweet breath, abandoned herself to devout reverie and prayed mentally for Catherine's soul.

Germain was deeply moved, and tried to think of something to say to little Marie to express the esteem and gratitude she inspired in him, but he could find nothing that

would give voice to his thoughts. He approached her to kiss his son, whom she was still holding against her breast, and it was hard for him to remove his lips from Petit-Pierre's brow.

"You kiss him too hard," said Marie, gently pushing the ploughman's head away, "you will wake him. Let me put him to bed again, for he has gone back to his dreams of paradise."

The child let her put him down, but as he stretched himself out on the goat-skin of the saddle, he asked if he were on Grise. Then, opening his great blue eyes, and gazing at the branches for a moment, he seemed to be in a waking dream, or to be impressed by an idea that had come into his mind during the day and took shape at the approach of sleep. "Little father," he said, "if you're going to give me another mother, I want it to be little Marie."

And, without awaiting a reply, he closed his eyes and went to sleep.

X

DESPITE THE COLD

Little Marie seemed to pay no further heed to the child's strange words than to look upon them as a proof of friendship; she wrapped him up carefully, stirred the fire, and, as the mist lying upon the neighboring pool gave no sign of lifting, she advised Germain to lie down near the fire and have a nap.

"I see that you're almost asleep now," she said, "for you don't say a word, and you are staring at the fire just as your little one did just now. Come, go to sleep, and I will watch over you and the child."

"You're the one to go to sleep," replied the ploughman, "and I will watch both of you, for I never was less inclined to sleep; I have fifty ideas in my head."

"Fifty, that's a good many," said the maiden, with some suggestion of mockery in her tone; "there are so many people who would like to have one!"

"Well, if I am not capable of having fifty, at all events I have one that hasn't left me for an hour."

"And I'll tell you what it is, as well as the ones you had before it."

"Very good! tell me, if you can guess, Marie; tell me yourself, I shall like that."

"An hour ago," she retorted, "you had the idea of eating, and now you have the idea of sleeping."

"Marie, I am only an ox-driver at best, but really, you seem to take me for an ox. You're a bad girl, and I see that you don't want to talk with me. Go to sleep, that will be better than criticising a man who isn't in good spirits."

"If you want to talk, let us talk," said the girl, half-reclining beside the child and resting her head against the saddle. "You're determined to worry, Germain, and in that you don't show much courage for a man. What should I not say, if I didn't fight as hard as I can against my own grief?"

"What, indeed; and that is just what I have in my head, my poor child! You're going to live far away from your people in a wretched place, all moors and bogs, where you will catch the fever in autumn, where there's no profit in raising sheep for wool, which always vexes a shepherdess who is interested in her business; and then you will be among strangers who may not be kind to you, who won't understand what you are worth. Upon my word, it pains me more than I can tell you, and I have a mind to take you back to your mother, instead of going to Fourche."

"You speak very kindly, but without sense, my poor Germain; one shouldn't be cowardly for his friends, and instead of pointing out the dark side of my lot, you ought to show me the bright side, as you did when we dined at La Rebec's."

"What would you have? that's the way things looked to me then, and they look

different now. You would do better to find a husband."

"That can't be, Germain, as I told you; and as it can't be, I don't think about it."

"But suppose you could find one, after all? Perhaps, if you would tell me what sort of a man you'd like him to be, I could succeed in thinking up some one."

"To think up some one is not to find him. I don't think about it at all, for it's of no use."

"You have never thought of finding a rich husband?"

"No, of course not, as I am poor as Job."

"But if he should be well off, you wouldn't be sorry to be well lodged, well fed, well dressed, and to belong to a family of good people who would allow you to help your mother along?"

"Oh! as to that, yes! to help my mother is my only wish."

"And if you should meet such a man, even if he wasn't in his first youth, you wouldn't object very much?"

"Oh! excuse me, Germain. That's just the thing I am particular about. I shouldn't like an old man."

"An old man, of course not; but a man of my age, for instance?"

"Your age is old for me, Germain; I should prefer Bastien so far as age goes, though Bastien isn't such a good-looking man as you."

"You would prefer Bastien the swineherd?" said Germain bitterly. "A fellow with eyes like the beasts he tends!"

"I would overlook his eyes for the sake of his eighteen years."

Germain had a horrible feeling of jealousy.—"Well, well," he said, "I see that your mind is set on Bastien. It's a queer idea, all the same!"

"Yes, it would be a queer idea," replied little Marie, laughing heartily, "and he

would be a queer husband. You could make him believe whatever you chose. For instance, I picked up a tomato in monsieur le curé's garden the other day; I told him it was a fine red apple, and he bit into it like a glutton. If you had seen the wry face he made! Mon Dieu, how ugly he was!"

"You don't love him then, as you laugh at him?"

"That wouldn't be any reason. But I don't love him: he's cruel to his little sister, and he isn't clean."

"Very good! and you don't feel inclined toward anybody else?"

"What difference does it make to you, Germain?"

"No difference, it's just for something to talk about. I see, my girl, that you have a sweetheart in your head already."

"No, Germain, you're mistaken, I haven't one yet; it may come later: but as I shall not marry till I have saved up a little money, it will be my lot to marry late and to marry an old man."

"Well, then, take an old man now."

"No indeed! when I am no longer young myself, it will be all the same to me; now it would be different."

"I see, Marie, that you don't like me; that's very clear," said Germain angrily, and without weighing his words.

Little Marie did not reply. Germain leaned over her: she was asleep; she had fallen back, conquered, struck down, as it were, by drowsiness, like children who fall asleep while they are prattling.

Germain was well pleased that she had not heard his last words; he realized that they were unwise, and he turned his back upon her, trying to change the current of his thoughts.

But it was of no avail, he could not sleep, nor could he think of anything else than

what he had just said. He walked around the fire twenty times, walked away and returned; at last, feeling as excited as if he had swallowed a mouthful of gunpowder, he leaned against the tree that sheltered the two children and watched them sleeping.

Chapter IX The child knelt on the girl's skirt, clasped his little hands, and began to repeat his prayer with interest and fervently at first, for he knew the beginning very well.

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"I don't know why I never noticed that little Marie is the prettiest girl in the province!" he thought. "She hasn't a great deal of color, but her little face is as fresh as a wild rose! What a pretty mouth and what a cunning little nose!—She isn't tall for her age, but she's built like a little quail and light as a lark!—I don't know why they think so much at home of a tall, stout, red-faced woman. My wife was rather thin and pale, and she suited me above all others.—This girl is delicate, but she's perfectly well and as pretty to look at as a white kid! And what a sweet, honest way she has! how well you can read her kind heart in her eyes, even when they are closed in sleep!—As for wit, she has more than my dear Catherine had, I must admit, and one would never be bored with her.—She's light-hearted, she's virtuous, she's a hard worker, she's affectionate, and she's amusing.—I don't see what more one could ask.

"But what business have I to think of all that?" resumed Germain, trying to look in another direction. "My father-in-law wouldn't listen to it, and the whole family would treat me as a madman! Besides, she herself wouldn't have me, poor child!—She thinks I am too old: she told me so. She isn't interested; it doesn't worry her much to think of being in want and misery, of wearing poor clothes and suffering with hunger two or three months in the year, provided that she satisfies her heart some day and can give herself to a husband who suits her—and she's right,

too! I would do the same in her place—and at this moment, if I could follow my own will, instead of embarking on a marriage that I don't like the idea of, I would choose a girl to my taste."

The more Germain strove to argue with himself and calm himself, the less he succeeded. He walked twenty steps away, to lose himself in the mist; and then he suddenly found himself on his knees beside the two sleeping children. Once he even tried to kiss Petit-Pierre, who had one arm around Marie's neck, and he went so far astray that Marie, feeling a breath as hot as fire upon her lips, awoke and looked at him in terror, understanding nothing of what was taking place within him.

"I didn't see you, my poor children!" said Germain, quickly drawing back. "I came very near falling on you and hurting you."

Little Marie was innocent enough to believe him and went to sleep again. Germain went to the other side of the fire, and vowed that he would not stir until she was awake. He kept his word, but it was a hard task. He thought that he should go mad.

At last, about midnight, the fog disappeared, and Germain could see the stars shining through the trees. The moon also shook itself clear of the vapors that shrouded it and began to sow diamonds on the damp moss. The trunks of the oak-trees remained in majestic obscurity; but, a little farther away, the white stems of the birches seemed like a row of phantoms in their shrouds. The fire was reflected in the pool; and the frogs, beginning to become accustomed to it, hazarded a few shrill, timid notes; the knotty branches of the old trees, bristling with pale lichens, crossed and recrossed, like great fleshless arms, over our travellers' heads; it was a lovely spot, but so lonely and melancholy that Germain, weary of suffering there, began to sing and to throw stones into the water to charm away the ghastly ennui of solitude. He wanted also to wake little Marie; and when he saw her rise and look about to see what the weather was like, he suggested that they should resume their journey.

"In two hours," he said, "the approach of dawn will make the air so cold that we

couldn't stay here, notwithstanding our fire.—Now we can see where we are going, and we shall be sure to find a house where they will let us in, or at least a barn where we can pass the rest of the night under cover."

Marie had no wish in the matter; and although she was still very sleepy, she prepared to go with Germain.

He took his son in his arms without waking him, and insisted that Marie should come and take a part of his cloak as she would not take her own from around Petit-Pierre.

When he felt the girl so near him, Germain, who had succeeded in diverting his thoughts and had brightened up a little for a moment, began to lose his head again. Two or three times he walked abruptly away from her and left her to walk by herself. Then, seeing that she had difficulty in keeping up with him, he waited for her, drew her hastily to his side, and held her so tight that she was amazed and angry too, although she dared not say so.

As they had no idea in what direction they had started out, they did not know in what direction they were going; so that they passed through the whole forest once more, found themselves again on the edge of the deserted moor, retraced their steps, and, after turning about and walking a long while, they spied a light through the trees.

"Good! there's a house," said Germain, "and people already awake, as the fire's lighted. Can it be very late?"

But it was not a house: it was their camp-fire which they had covered when they left it, and which had rekindled in the breeze.

They had walked about for two hours, only to find themselves back at their starting-point.

XI

IN THE OPEN AIR

"This time I give it up!" said Germain, stamping on the ground. "A spell has been cast on us, that's sure, and we shall not get away from here till daylight. This place must be bewitched."

"Well, well, let's not lose our tempers," said Marie, "but let us make the best of it. We'll make a bigger fire, the child is so well wrapped up that he runs no risk, and it won't kill us to pass a night out-of-doors. Where did you hide the saddle, Germain? In the middle of the holly-bushes, you great stupid! It's such a convenient place to go and get it!"

"Here, take the child, while I pull his bed out of the brambles; I don't want you to prick your fingers."

"It's all done, there's the bed, and a few pricks aren't sword-cuts," retorted the brave girl.

She proceeded to put little Pierre to bed once more; the boy was so sound asleep by that time, that he knew nothing about their last journey. Germain piled so much wood on the fire that it lighted up the forest all around; but little Marie was at the end of her strength, and, although she did not complain, her legs refused to hold her. She was deathly pale, and her teeth chattered with cold and weakness. Germain took her in his arms to warm her; and anxiety, compassion, an irresistible outburst of tenderness taking possession of his heart, imposed silence on his passions. His tongue was loosened, as if by a miracle, and as all feeling of shame disappeared, he said to her:

"Marie, I like you, and I am very unfortunate in not making you like me. If you would take me for your husband, neither father-in-law nor relations nor neighbors nor advice could prevent me from giving myself to you. I know you would make my children happy and teach them to respect their mother's memory, and, as my

conscience would be at rest, I could satisfy my heart. I have always been fond of you, and now I am so in love with you that if you should ask me to spend my life fulfilling your thousand wishes, I would swear on the spot to do it. Pray, pray, see how I love you and forget my age! Just think what a false idea it is that people have that a man of thirty is old. Besides, I am only twenty-eight! a girl is afraid of being criticised for taking a man ten or twelve years older than she is, because it isn't the custom of the province; but I have heard that in other places they don't think about that; on the other hand, they prefer to give a young girl, for her support, a sober-minded man and one whose courage has been put to the test, rather than a young fellow who may go wrong, and turn out to be a bad lot instead of the nice boy he is supposed to be. And then, too, years don't always make age. That depends on a man's health and strength. When a man is worn out by overwork and poverty, or by evil living, he is old before he's twenty-five. While I—But you're not listening to me, Marie."

"Yes, I am, Germain, I hear what you say," replied little Marie; "but I am thinking of what my mother has always told me: that a woman of sixty is much to be pitied when her husband is seventy or seventy-five and can't work any longer to support her. He grows infirm, and she must take care of him at an age when she herself is beginning to have great need of care and rest. That is how people come to end their lives in the gutter."

"Parents are right to say that, I agree, Marie," said Germain; "but, after all, they would sacrifice the whole of youth, which is the best part of life, to provide against what may happen at an age when one has ceased to be good for anything, and when one is indifferent about ending his life in one way or another. But I am in no danger of dying of hunger in my old age. I am in a fair way to save up something, because, living as I do with my wife's people, I work hard and spend nothing. Besides, I will love you so well, you know, that that will prevent me from growing old. They say that when a man's happy he retains his youth, and I feel that I am younger than

Bastien just from loving you; for he doesn't love you, he's too stupid, too much of a child to understand how pretty and good you are, and made to be courted. Come, Marie, don't hate me, I am not a bad man; I made my Catherine happy; she said before God, on her death-bed, that she had never been anything but contented with me, and she advised me to marry again. It seems that her heart spoke to her child to-night, just as he went to sleep. Didn't you hear what he said? and how his little mouth trembled while his eyes were looking at something in the air that we couldn't see! He saw his mother, you may be sure, and she made him say that he wanted you to take her place."

"Germain," Marie replied, greatly surprised and very grave, "you talk straightforwardly, and all you say is true. I am sure that I should do well to love you, if it wouldn't displease your relations too much; but what would you have me do? my heart says nothing to me for you. I like you very much; but although your age doesn't make you ugly, it frightens me. It seems to me as if you were something like an uncle or godfather to me; that I owe you respect, and that there would be times when you would treat me as a little girl rather than as your wife and your equal. And then my girl friends would laugh at me, perhaps, and although it would be foolish to pay any attention to that, I think I should be ashamed and a little bit sad on my wedding-day."

"Those are childish reasons; you talk exactly like a child, Marie!"

"Well, yes, I am a child," she said, "and that is just why I am afraid of a man who knows too much. You see, I'm too young for you, for you are finding fault with me already for talking foolishly! I can't have more sense than belongs to my years."

"Alas! mon Dieu! how I deserve to be pitied for being so awkward and for my ill-success in saying what I think! Marie, you don't love me, that's the fact; you think I am too simple and too dull. If you loved me a little, you wouldn't see my defects so plainly. But you don't love me, you see!"

"Well, it isn't my fault," she replied, a little wounded by his dropping the familiar form of address he had hitherto used; "I do the best I can while I listen to you, but the harder I try, the less able I am to make myself believe that we ought to be husband and wife."

Germain did not reply. He hid his face in his hands and it was impossible for little Marie to tell whether he was crying or sulking or asleep. She was a little disturbed to see him so depressed, and to be unable to divine what was going on in his mind; but she dared say no more to him, and as she was too much astonished by what had taken place to have any desire to go to sleep again, she waited impatiently for daybreak, continuing to keep up the fire and watching the child, whom Germain seemed to have forgotten. Germain, meanwhile, was not asleep; he was not reflecting on his lot, nor was he devising any bold stroke, or any plan of seduction. He was suffering keenly, he had a mountain of ennui upon his heart. He wished he were dead. Everything seemed to be turning out badly for him, and if he could have wept, he would not have done it by halves. But there was a little anger with himself mingled with his suffering, and he was suffocating, unable and unwilling to complain.

When day broke and the noise in the fields announced the fact to Germain, he took his hands from his face and rose. He saw that little Marie had not slept, either, but he could think of nothing to say to her to show his solicitude. He was utterly discouraged. He concealed Grise's saddle in the bushes once more, took his bag over his shoulder, and said, taking his son's hand:

"Now, Marie, we'll try and finish our journey. Do you want me to take you to Ormeaux?"

"We will go out of the woods together," she replied, "and when we know where we are, we will go our separate ways."

Germain said nothing. He was wounded because the girl did not ask him to escort

her to Ormeaux, and he did not realize that he had made the offer in a tone that seemed to challenge a refusal.

A wood-cutter, whom they met within two hundred paces, pointed out the path they must take, and told them that after crossing the great meadow they had only to go, in the one case straight ahead, in the other to the left, to reach their respective destinations, which, by the way, were so near together that the houses at Fourche could be distinctly seen from the farm of Ormeaux, and vice versa.

When they had thanked the wood-cutter and passed on, he called them back to ask if they had not lost a horse.

"I found a fine gray mare in my yard," he said, "where she may have gone to escape the wolf. My dogs barked all night long, and at daybreak I saw the beast under my shed; she's there still. Go and look at her, and if you know her, take her."

Germain, having described Grise and being convinced that it was really she, started back to get his saddle. Little Marie thereupon offered to take the child to Ormeaux, where he could come and get him after he had paid his respects at Fourche.

"He isn't very clean after the night we have passed," she said. "I will brush his clothes, wash his pretty little face, and comb his hair, and when he's all spick and span, you can present him to your new family."

"How do you know that I am going to Fourche?" rejoined Germain testily. "Perhaps I shan't go there."

"Oh! yes, Germain, you ought to go, and you will," said the girl.

"You are in a great hurry to have me married to somebody else, so that you can be sure I won't make myself a nuisance to you."

"Come, come, Germain, don't think any more about that; that's an idea that came to you in the night, because our unpleasant adventure disturbed your wits a little. But now you must be reasonable again; I promise to forget what you said to me and

never to mention it to any one."

"Oh! mention it, if you choose. I am not in the habit of taking back what I say. What I said to you was true and honest, and I shan't blush for it before any one."

"Very good; but if your wife knew that you had thought of another woman just at the moment you called on her, it might turn her against you. So be careful what you say now; don't look at me like that, with such a strange expression, before other people. Think of Père Maurice, who relies on your obedience, and who would be very angry with me if I turned you from doing as he wants you to. Good-by, Germain; I'll take Petit-Pierre with me so as to force you to go to Fourche. I keep him as a pledge."

"Do you want to go with her?" said the ploughman to his son, seeing that he was clinging to little Marie's hands and following her resolutely.

"Yes, father," replied the child, who had been listening and understood in his own way what they had been saying unsuspectingly before him. "I am going with my darling Marie: you can come and get me when you're done getting married; but I want Marie to be my little mother, just the same."

"You see that he wants it to be so," Germain said to the young girl. "Listen, Petit-Pierre," he added, "I want her to be your mother and stay with you always: she's the one that isn't willing. Try to make her do what I want her to."

"Don't you be afraid, papa, I'll make her say yes: little Marie always does what I want her to."

He walked away with the girl. Germain was left alone, more depressed and irresolute than ever.

XII

THE VILLAGE LIONESS

However, when he had repaired the disorder of travel in his clothes and his horse's accoutrements, when he was mounted upon Grise and had ascertained the road to Fourche, he reflected that there was no drawing back and that he must forget that night of excitement as a dangerous dream.

He found Père Léonard in the doorway of his white house, sitting on a pretty wooden bench painted spinach green. There were six stone steps leading to the frontdoor, showing that the house had a cellar. The wall between the garden and hemp-field was roughcast with lime and pebbles. It was an attractive place; one might almost have taken it for the abode of a substantial bourgeois.

Germain's prospective father-in-law came to meet him, and, after five minutes spent in questioning him concerning his whole family, he added this phrase, invariably used to question courteously those whom one meets as to the object of their journey: "So you have come out this way for a little ride, eh?"

"I came to see you," replied the ploughman, "and to offer you this little gift of game from my father-in-law, and to say, also from him, that you would know my purpose in coming."

"Ha! ha!" laughed Père Léonard, patting his round paunch, "I see, I hear, I understood!" And he added, with a wink: "You'll not be alone in paying your respects, my young friend. There are three in the house already, dancing attendance like you. I don't turn anybody away, and I should be hard put to it to decide against any one of them, for they're all good matches. However, on account of Pere Maurice and the quality of your lands, I should prefer you. But my daughter's of age and mistress of her own property; so she will do as she pleases. Go in and introduce yourself; I hope you may draw the lucky number!"

"Pardon, excuse me," replied Germain, greatly surprised to find himself one of several, where he had expected to be alone. "I didn't know that your daughter was already provided with suitors, and I didn't come to dispute for her with others."

"If you thought that because you were slow in coming," retorted Père Léonard, with undiminished good-humor, "you would catch my daughter napping, you made a very great mistake, my boy. Catherine has something to attract husbands with, and she'll have only too many to choose from. But go into the house, I tell you, and don't lose courage. She's a woman worth disputing for."

And, pushing Germain by the shoulders with rough good-humor, "Here, Catherine," he cried, entering the house, "here's one more!"

This jovial but vulgar manner of being introduced to the widow, in the presence of her other suitors, put the finishing touch to the ploughman's confusion and annoyance. He felt ill at ease, and stood for some moments without venturing to turn his eyes on the fair one and her court.

The Widow Guérin was well made, and did not lack freshness. But the expression of her face and her costume repelled Germain at the first glance. She had a forward, self-satisfied air, and her mob-cap trimmed with a triple row of lace, her silk apron, and her black lace fichu were decidedly not in harmony with the idea he had conceived of a sedate, serious-minded widow.

This elegance in dress and her free and easy manners made her appear old and ugly to him, although she was neither. He thought that such coquettish attire and such playful manners would be well suited to the age and keen wit of little Marie, but that such pleasantry on the widow's part was heavy and stale, and that there was no distinction in the way she wore her fine clothes.

The three suitors were sitting at a table laden with food and wine, which were kept there for them through the whole of Sunday morning; for Père Léonard loved to exhibit his opulence, nor was the widow sorry to display her fine plate and to keep open house like a woman of means. Germain, simple and trustful as he was, did not lack penetration in his observation of things, and for the first time in his life he stood on the defensive while drinking. Père Léonard had compelled him to take a seat with

his rivals, and, seating himself opposite him, he treated him as handsomely as possible, and devoted himself to him with evident partiality. The gift of game, despite the breach Germain had made in it on his own account, was still considerable enough to produce an effect. The widow seemed to appreciate it, and the suitors eyed it disdainfully.

Germain felt ill at ease in that company, and did not eat with any heartiness. Père Léonard rallied him about it.—"You seem very down in the mouth," he said, "and you're sulking with your glass. You mustn't let love spoil your appetite, for a fasting lover can't find so many pretty things to say as the man who has sharpened up his wits with a mouthful of wine."

Germain was mortified that it should be assumed that he was in love; and the affected demeanor of the widow, who lowered her eyes with a smile, like one who is sure of her game, made him long to protest against his alleged surrender; but he feared to seem discourteous, so he smiled and took patience.

The widow's lovers seemed to him like three rustic clowns. They must have been rich, or she would not have listened to their suits. One of them was more than forty, and was about as stout as Père Léonard; another had but one eye, and drank so much that it made him stupid; the third was young and not a bad-looking fellow; but he attempted to be witty, and said such insane things that one could but pity him. But the widow laughed as if she admired all his idiotic remarks, and therein she gave no proof of good taste. Germain thought at first that she was in love with the young man; but he soon perceived that he was himself the recipient of marked encouragement, and that she wished him to yield more readily to her charms. That was to him a reason for feeling and appearing even colder and more solemn.

The hour of Mass arrived, and they left the table to attend in a body. They had to go to Mers, a good half-league away, and Germain was so tired that he would have been glad of an opportunity to take a nap first: but he was not in the habit of being

absent from Mass, and he started with the others.

The roads were filled with people, and the widow walked proudly along, escorted by her three suitors, taking the arm of one, then of another, bridling up and carrying her head high. She would have been very glad to exhibit the fourth to the passers-by; but it seemed so ridiculous to be paraded thus in company by a petticoat, in everybody's sight, that he kept at a respectful distance, talking with Père Léonard and finding a way to divert his thoughts and occupy his mind so that they did not seem to belong to the party.

XIII

THE MASTER

When they reached the village, the widow stopped to wait for them. She was determined to make her entry with her whole suite; but Germain, refusing to afford her that satisfaction, left Père Léonard, spoke with several people of his acquaintance, and entered the church by another door. The widow was vexed with him.

After the Mass, she made her appearance in triumph on the greensward where dancing was in progress, and opened three successive dances with her three lovers. Germain watched her, and concluded that she danced well, but with affectation.

"Well!" said Léonard, clapping him on the shoulder, "so you don't ask my daughter to dance? You are altogether too bashful!"

"I don't dance since I lost my wife," the ploughman replied.

"Oh! but when you're looking for another, mourning's at an end in your heart as well as in your clothes."

"That's no argument, Père Léonard; besides, I feel too old, I don't care for dancing

any more."

"Hark ye," rejoined Léonard, leading him apart, "you took offence when you entered my house, because you found the citadel already surrounded by besiegers, and I see that you're very proud; but that isn't reasonable, my boy. My daughter's used to being courted, especially these last two years since her mourning came to an end, and it isn't her place to make advances to you."

"Your daughter has been free to marry again for two years, you say, and hasn't made up her mind yet?" said Germain.

"She doesn't choose to hurry, and she's right. Although she has rather a lively way with her, and you may think she doesn't reflect much, she's a woman of great good sense and one who knows very well what she's about."

"I don't see how that can be," said Germain ingenuously, "for she has three gallants in her train, and if she knew what she wanted, at least two of them would seem to her to be in the way and she would request them to stay at home."

"Why so? you don't know anything about it, Germain. She doesn't want either the old man or the one-eyed one or the young one, I'm almost certain of it; but if she should turn them away, people would say she meant to remain a widow and no others would come."

"Ah, yes! they act as a sign-post for her!"

"As you say. Where's the harm if they like it?"

"Every one to his taste!" said Germain.

"That wouldn't be to your taste, I see. But come, now, we can come to an understanding: supposing that she prefers you, the field could be left clear for you."

"Yes, supposing! And how long must I stand with my nose in the air before I can find out?"

"That depends on yourself, I fancy, if you know how to talk and argue. So far my

daughter has understood very clearly that the best part of her life would be the part that she passed in letting men court her, and she doesn't feel in any hurry to become one man's servant when she can give orders to several. And so, as long as the game pleases her, she can divert herself with it; but if you please her more than the game, the game may be stopped. All you have to do is not to be discouraged. Come every Sunday, ask her to dance, give her to understand that you're on the list, and if she finds you more likeable and better informed than the others, I don't doubt that she'll tell you so some fine day."

"Excuse me, Père Léonard, your daughter is entitled to act as she pleases, and I have no right to blame her. I would act differently if I were in her place; I'd be more honest, and I wouldn't let men throw away their time who probably have something better to do than hang around a woman who laughs at them. But, after all, if that entertains her and makes her happy, it's none of my business. But I must tell you one thing that is a little embarrassing for me to confess since this morning, seeing that you began by making a mistake as to my intentions and didn't give me any time to reply; so that you believe something that isn't so. Pray understand that I didn't come here to ask for your daughter's hand, but to buy a pair of oxen that you intend to take to the fair next week and that my father-in-law thinks will suit him."

"I understand, Germain," said Léonard calmly; "you changed your mind when you saw my daughter with her lovers. That's as you please. It seems that what attracts one repels another, and you have the right to withdraw as long as you haven't spoken yet. If you really want to buy my oxen, come and look at them in the pasture; we'll talk it over, and whether we strike a bargain or not, you'll come and take dinner with us before you go back."

"I don't want you to put yourself out," replied Germain, "perhaps you have business here; I'm a little tired of watching them dance and of doing nothing. I'll go to look at your cattle, and join you later at your house."

Thereupon, Germain slipped away and walked toward the meadows, where Léonard had pointed out some of his beasts in the distance. It was true that Père Maurice wanted to buy, and Germain thought that if he should take back a good yoke at a moderate price, he would be pardoned more readily for having voluntarily failed to accomplish the real object of his journey.

He walked fast, and was soon within a short distance of Ormeaux. Thereupon he felt that he must go and kiss his son and see little Marie once more, although he had lost the hope and banished from his mind the thought of owing his happiness to her. All that he had seen and heard—the vain, giddy woman; the father, at once cunning and shallow, who encouraged his daughter in her pride and disingenuous habits; the imitation of city luxury, which seemed to him an offence against the dignity of country manners; the time wasted in indolent, foolish conversation, that household so different from his own, and, above all, the profound discomfort that the husbandman feels when he lays aside his laborious habits; all the ennui and annoyance he had undergone within the last few hours—made Germain long to be once more with his child and his little neighbor. Even if he had not been in love with the latter, he would have sought her none the less for distraction, and to restore his mind to its accustomed channels.

But he looked in vain in the neighboring fields, he saw neither little Marie nor little Pierre; and yet it was the time when the shepherds are in the fields. There was a large flock in a pasture; he asked a young boy who was tending them if the sheep belonged to the farm of Ormeaux.

"Yes," said the child.

"Are you the shepherd? do boys tend woolly beasts for the farmers in your neighborhood?"

"No. I'm tending 'em to-day because the shepherdess has gone away: she was sick."

"But haven't you a new shepherdess who came this morning?"

"Oh! yes! she's gone, too, already."

"What! gone? didn't she have a child with her?"

"Yes, a little boy; he cried. They both went away after they'd been here two hours."

"Where did they go?"

"Where they came from, I suppose. I didn't ask 'em."

"But what did they go away for?" said Germain, with increasing anxiety.

"Why, how do I know?"

"Didn't they agree about wages? but that must have been agreed on beforehand."

"I can't tell you anything about it. I saw them go in and come out, that's all."

Germain went on to the farm and questioned the farm-hands. No one could explain what had happened; but all agreed that, after talking with the farmer, the girl had gone away without saying a word, taking with her the child, who was weeping.

"Did they ill-treat my son?" cried Germain, his eyes flashing fire.

"He was your son, was he? How did he come to be with that girl? Where are you from, and what's your name?"

Germain, seeing that his questions were answered by other questions, according to the custom of the country, stamped his foot impatiently, and asked to speak with the master.

The master was not there: he was not in the habit of staying the whole day when he came to the farm. He had mounted his horse, and ridden off to some other of his farms.

"But surely you can find out the reason of that young girl's going away?" said Germain, assailed by keen anxiety.

The farm-hand exchanged a strange smile with his wife, then replied that he knew nothing about it, that it did not concern him. All that Germain could learn was that

the girl and the child had gone in the direction of Fourche. He hurried to Fourche: the widow and her lovers had not returned, nor had Père Léonard. The servant told him that a young girl and a child had come there and inquired for him, but that she, not knowing them, thought it best not to admit them and advised them to go to Mers.

"Why did you refuse to let them in?" said Germain angrily. "Are you so suspicious in these parts that you don't open your door to your neighbor?"

"Oh! bless me!" the servant replied, "in a rich house like this, one has to keep a sharp lookout. I am responsible for everything when the masters are away, and I can't open the door to everybody that comes."

"That's a vile custom," said Germain, "and I'd rather be poor than live in fear like that. Adieu, girl! adieu to your wretched country!"

He inquired at the neighboring houses. Everybody had seen the shepherdess and the child. As the little one had left Belair unexpectedly, without being dressed for the occasion, with a torn blouse and his little lamb's fleece over his shoulders; and as little Marie was necessarily very shabbily dressed at all times, they had been taken for beggars. Some one had offered them bread; the girl had accepted a piece for the child, who was hungry, then she had walked away very fast with him and had gone into the woods.

Germain reflected a moment, then asked if the farmer from Ormeaux had not come to Fourche.

"Yes," was the reply; "he rode by on horseback a few minutes after the girl."

"Did he ride after her?"

"Ah! you know him, do you?" laughed the village innkeeper, to whom he had applied for information.

"Yes, to be sure; he's a devil of a fellow for running after the girls. But I don't believe he caught that one; although, after all, if he had seen her—"

"That's enough, thanks!" And he flew rather than ran to Leonard's stable. He threw the saddle on Grise's back, leaped upon her, and galloped away in the direction of the woods of Chanteloube.

His heart was beating fast with anxiety and wrath, the perspiration rolled down his forehead. He covered Grise's sides with blood, although the mare, when she found that she was on the way to her stable, did not need to be urged to go at full speed.

XIV

THE OLD WOMAN

Germain soon found himself at the spot on the edge of the pool where he had passed the night. The fire was still smoking; an old woman was picking up what was left of the dead wood Marie had collected. Germain stopped to question her. She was deaf, and misunderstood his questions.

"Yes, my boy," she said, "this is the Devil's Pool. It's a bad place, and you mustn't come near it without throwing three stones in with your left hand and crossing yourself with your right: that drives away the spirits. Unless they do that, misfortune comes to those who walk around it."

"I didn't ask you about that," said Germain, drawing nearer to her and shouting at the top of his voice: "Haven't you seen a girl and a young child going through the woods?"

"Yes," said the old woman, "there was a small child drowned there!"

Germain shivered from head to foot; but luckily the old woman added:

"That was a long, long while ago; they put up a beautiful cross; but on a fine stormy night the evil spirits threw it into the water. You can still see one end of it. If any one had the bad luck to stop here at night, he would be very sure not to be able to go

away before dawn. It would do him no good to walk, walk: he might travel two hundred leagues through the woods and find himself still in the same place."—The ploughman's imagination was impressed, do what he would, by what he heard, and the idea of the misfortune which might follow, to justify the remainder of the old woman's assertions, took such complete possession of his brain that he felt cold all over his body. Despairing of obtaining any additional information, he mounted his horse and began to ride through the woods, calling Pierre at the top of his voice, whistling, cracking his whip, breaking off branches to fill the forest with the noise of his progress, then listening to see if any voice answered; but he heard naught but the bells on the cows scattered among the bushes, and the fierce grunting of pigs fighting over the acorns.

At last, Germain heard behind him the footsteps of a horse following in his track, and a man of middle age, swarthy, robust, dressed like a semi-bourgeois, shouted to him to stop. Germain had never seen the farmer of Ormeaux; but an angry instinct led him to determine at once that it was he. He turned, and, eyeing him from head to foot, waited to hear what he had to say to him.

"Haven't you seen a young girl of fifteen or sixteen, with a little boy, pass this way?" said the farmer, affecting an indifferent manner, although he was visibly moved.

"What do you want of her?" demanded Germain, not seeking to disguise his indignation.

"I might tell you that that was none of your business, my friend, but as I have no reason to hide it, I will tell you that she's a shepherdess I hired for the year without knowing her.—When she came to the farm, she seemed to me too young and not strong enough for the work. I thanked her, but I insisted on paying her what her little journey had cost; and she went off in a rage while my back was turned.—She was in such a hurry that she even forgot part of her things and her purse, which hasn't very much in it, to be sure; a few sous, I suppose!—but as I had business in this direction,

I thought I might meet her and give her what she forgot and what I owe her."

Germain was too honest a soul not to hesitate when he heard that story, which was possible at least, if not very probable. He fixed a piercing gaze on the farmer, who bore his scrutiny with much impudence or else with perfect innocence.

"I want to have a clear conscience," said Germain to himself, and, restraining his indignation, he continued aloud:

"She's a girl from our neighborhood; I know her: she must be somewhere about here. Let us go on together—we shall find her, I've no doubt."

"You are right," said the farmer. "Let's go on—but, if we don't find her at the end of the path, I give it up—for I must take the Ardentes road."

"Oho!" thought the ploughman, "I won't leave you! even if I should have to twist around the Devil's Pool with you for twenty-four hours!"

"Stay!" said Germain suddenly, fixing his eyes on a clump of furze which was moving back and forth in a peculiar way: "holà! holà! Petit-Pierre, my child, is that you?"

The child, recognizing his father's voice, leaped out of the bushes like a kid, but when he saw that he was with the farmer, he stopped as if in terror, and stood still, uncertain what to do.

"Come, my Pierre, come, it's me!" cried the ploughman, riding toward him and leaping down from his horse to take him in his arms: "and where's little Marie?"

"She's hiding there, because she's afraid of that bad black man, and so am I."

"Oh! don't you be afraid; I am here—Marie! Marie! it's me!"

Marie came crawling out from the bushes, and as soon as she saw Germain, whom the farmer was following close, she ran and threw herself into his arms; and, clinging to him like a daughter to her father, she exclaimed:

"Ah! my good Germain, you will defend me; I'm not afraid with you."

Germain shuddered. He looked at Marie: she was pale, her clothes were torn by the brambles through which she had run, seeking the thickest underbrush, like a doe with the hunters on her track. But there was neither despair nor shame on her face.

"Your master wants to speak to you," he said, still watching her features.

"My master?" she said proudly; "that man is not my master and never will be!—You are my master, you, Germain. I want you to take me back with you—will work for you for nothing!"

The farmer had ridden forward, feigning some impatience.

"Ah! little one," he said, "you forgot something which I have brought you."

"No, no, monsieur," replied little Marie, "I didn't forget anything, and there's nothing I want to ask you for—"

"Hark ye a minute," said the farmer, "I have something to say to you!—Come!—don't be afraid—just two words."

"You can say them out loud. I have no secrets with you."

"Come and get your money, at least."

"My money? You don't owe me anything, thank God!"

"I suspected as much," said Germain in an undertone; "but never mind, Marie, listen to what he has to say to you—for, for my part, I am curious to find out. You can tell me afterward: I have my reasons for that. Go beside his horse—I won't lose sight of you."

Marie took three steps toward the farmer, who said to her, leaning forward on the pommel of his saddle, and lowering his voice:

"Here's a bright louis-d'or for you, little one! you won't say anything, understand? I'll say that I concluded you weren't strong enough for the work on my farm.—And don't let anything more be said about it. I'll come and see you again one of these days, and if you haven't said anything, I'll give you something else. And then, if

you're more reasonable, you'll only have to say the word: I will take you home with me, or else come and talk with you in the pasture at dusk. What present shall I bring you?"

"There is my gift to you, monsieur!" replied little Marie aloud, throwing his louis-d'or in his face with no gentle hand. "I thank you very much, and I beg you to let me know beforehand when you are coming our way: all the young men in my neighborhood will turn out to receive you, because our people are very fond of bourgeois who try to make love to poor girls! You'll see, they'll be on the lookout for you!"

"You're a liar and a silly babbler!" said the farmer in a rage, raising his stick threateningly. "You'd like to make people believe what isn't true, but you won't get any money out of me: I know your kind!"

Marie had recoiled in terror; but Germain darted to the farmer's horse's head, seized the rein, and shook it vigorously:

"I understand now!" he said, "and I see plainly enough what the trouble was. Dismount! my man! come down and let us have a talk!"

The farmer was by no means anxious to take a hand in the game: he spurred his horse in order to free himself, and tried to strike the ploughman's hands with his stick and make him relax his hold; but Germain eluded the blow, and, taking him by the leg, unhorsed him and brought him to the heather, where he knocked him down, although the farmer was soon upon his feet again and defended himself sturdily.

Chapter XIV Marie had recoiled in terror; but Germain darted to the farmer's horse's head, seized the rein, and shook it vigorously.

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"Coward!" said Germain, when he had him beneath him, "I could break every bone in your body if I chose! But I don't like to harm anybody, and besides, no

punishment would mend your conscience. However, you shan't stir from this spot until you have asked this girl's pardon on your knees."

The farmer, who was familiar with affairs of that sort, tried to turn it off as a joke. He claimed that his offence was not so very serious, as it consisted only in words, and said that he was willing to beg the girl's pardon, on condition that he might kiss her and that they should all go and drink a pint of wine at the nearest inn and part good friends.

"You disgust me!" replied Germain, pressing his face against the ground, "and I long to see the last of your ugly face. There, blush if you can, and you had better take the road of the affronteux[2] when you come to our town."

He picked up the farmer's holly staff, broke it across his knee to show the strength of his wrists, and threw the pieces away with a contemptuous gesture.

Then, taking his son's hand in one of his, and little Marie's in the other, he walked away, trembling with indignation.

XV

THE RETURN TO THE FARM

Within a quarter of an hour they had crossed the moors. They trotted along the high-road, and Grise neighed at every familiar object. Petit-Pierre told his father what had taken place so far as he had been able to understand it.

"When we got there," he said, "that man came and talked to my Marie in the sheepfold, where we went first to see the fine sheep. I'd got up into the crib to play, and that man didn't see me. Then he said good-day to my Marie and then he kissed her."

"You let him kiss you, Marie?" said Germain, trembling with anger.

"I thought it was a compliment, a custom of the place for new arrivals, just as grandma, at your house, kisses the girls who take service with her, to show that she adopts them and will be like a mother to them."

"And then," continued Petit-Pierre, who was very proud to have a story to tell, "that man said something naughty, something you told me not to say and not to remember: so I forgot it right away. But if my papa wants me to tell him what it was—"

"No, my Pierre, I don't want to hear it, and I don't want you to remember it ever."

"Then I'll forget it again," said the child. "And then that man acted as if he was mad because Marie said she was going away. He told her he'd give her all she wanted,—a hundred francs! And my Marie got mad, too. Then he went at her, just like he was going to hurt her. I was afraid, and I ran up to Marie and cried. Then that man said like this: 'What's that? where did that child come from? Put him out of here.' And he put up his stick to beat me. But my Marie stopped him, and she said like this: 'We will talk by and by, monsieur; now I must take this child to Fourche, and then I'll come back again.' And as soon as he'd gone out of the sheepfold, my Marie says to me like this: 'Let's run away, my Pierre, we must go away right off, for that man's a bad man, and he would only hurt us.'—Then we went behind the barns and crossed a little field and went to Fourche to look for you. But you weren't there, and they wouldn't let us wait for you. And then that man came up behind us on his black horse, and we ran still farther away, and then we went and hid in the woods. Then he came, too, and we hid when we heard him coming. And then, when he'd gone by, we began to run for ourselves so as to go home; and then at last you came and found us; and that's all there was. I didn't forget anything, did I, my Marie?"

"No, Pierre, and it's the truth. Now, Germain, you will bear witness for me and tell everybody at home that it wasn't for lack of courage and being willing to work that I couldn't stay over yonder."

"And I will ask you, Marie," said Germain, "to ask yourself the question, whether, when it comes to defending a woman and punishing a knave, a man of twenty-eight isn't too old? I'd like to know if Bastien, or any other pretty boy who has the advantage of being ten years younger than I am, wouldn't have been crushed by that man, as Petit-Pierre calls him: what do you think about it?"

"I think, Germain, that you have done me a very great service, and that I shall thank you for it all my life."

"Is that all?"

"My little father," said the child, "I didn't think to tell little Marie what I promised you. I didn't have time, but I'll tell her at home, and I'll tell grandma, too."

This promise on his child's part gave Germain abundant food for reflection. The problem now was how to explain his position to his family, and while setting forth his grievances against the widow Guérin, to avoid telling them what other thoughts had predisposed him to be so keen-sighted and so harsh in his judgment.

When one is happy and proud, the courage to make others accept one's happiness seems easily within reach; but to be rebuffed in one direction and blamed in another is not a very pleasant plight.

Luckily, Pierre was asleep when they reached the farm, and Germain put him down on his bed without waking him. Then he entered upon such explanations as he was able to give. Père Maurice, sitting upon his three-legged stool in the doorway, listened gravely to him, and, although he was ill pleased with the result of the expedition, when Germain, after describing the widow's system of coquetry, asked his father in-law if he had time to go and pay court to her fifty-two Sundays in the year with the chance of being dismissed at the end of the year, the old man replied, nodding his head in token of assent: "You are not wrong, Germain; that couldn't be." And again, when Germain told how he had been compelled to bring little Marie home again without loss of time to save her from the insults, perhaps from the

violence, of an unworthy master, Père Maurice again nodded assent, saying: "You are not wrong, Germain; that's as it should be."

When Germain had finished his story and given all his reasons, his father-in-law and mother-in-law simultaneously uttered a heavy sigh of resignation as they exchanged glances.

Then the head of the family rose, saying: "Well! God's will be done! affection isn't made to order!"

"Come to supper, Germain," said the mother-in-law. "It's a pity that couldn't be arranged better; however, it wasn't God's will, it seems. We must look somewhere else."

"Yes," the old man added, "as my wife says, we must look somewhere else."

There was no further sound in the house, and when Petit-Pierre rose the next morning with the larks, at dawn, being no longer excited by the extraordinary events of the last two days, he relapsed into the normal apathy of little peasants of his age, forgot all that had filled his little head, and thought of nothing but playing with his brothers, and being a man with the horses and oxen.

Germain tried to forget, too, by plunging into his work again; but he became so melancholy and so absent-minded that everybody noticed it. He did not speak to little Marie, he did not even look at her; and yet, if any one had asked him in which pasture she was, or in what direction she had gone, there was not an hour in the day when he could not have told if he had chosen to reply. He had not dared ask his people to take her on at the farm during the winter, and yet he was well aware that she must be suffering from poverty. But she was not suffering, and Mère Guillette could never understand why her little store of wood never grew less, and how her shed was always filled in the morning when she had left it almost empty the night before. It was the same with the wheat and potatoes. Some one came through the window in the loft, and emptied a bag on the floor without waking anybody or

leaving any tracks. The old woman was anxious and rejoiced at the same time; she bade her daughter not mention the matter, saying that if people knew what was happening in her house they would take her for a witch. She really believed that the devil had a hand in it, but she was by no means eager to fall out with him by calling upon the curé to exorcise him from her house; she said to herself that it would be time to do that when Satan came and demanded her soul in exchange for his benefactions.

Little Marie had a clearer idea of the truth, but she dared not speak to Germain for fear that he would recur to his idea of marriage, and she pretended when with him to notice nothing.

XVI

MÈRE MAURICE

One day, Mère Maurice, being alone in the orchard with Germain, said to him affectionately: "My poor son, I don't think you're well. You don't eat as much as usual, you never laugh, and you talk less and less. Has any one in the house, have we ourselves wounded you, without meaning to do it or knowing that we had done it?"

"No, mother," replied Germain, "you have always been as kind to me as the mother who brought me into the world, and I should be an ungrateful fellow if I complained of you, or your husband, or any one in the house."

"In that case, my child, it must be that your grief for your wife's death has come back. Instead of lessening with time, your loneliness grows worse, and you absolutely must do what your father-in-law very wisely advised, you must marry again."

"Yes, mother, that would be my idea, too; but the women you advised me to seek don't suit me. When I see them, instead of forgetting Catherine, I think of her all the more."

"The trouble apparently is, Germain, that we haven't succeeded in divining your taste. So you must help us by telling us the truth. Doubtless there's a woman somewhere who was made for you, for the good Lord doesn't make anybody without putting by his happiness for him in somebody else. So if you know where to go for the wife you need, go and get her; and whether she's pretty or ugly, young or old, rich or poor, we have made up our minds, my old man and I, to give our consent; for we're tired of seeing you so sad, and we can't live at peace if you are not."

"You are as good as the good Lord, mother, and so is father," replied Germain; "but your compassion can't cure my trouble: the girl I would like won't have me."

"Is it because she's too young? It's unwise for you to put your thoughts on a young girl."

"Well, yes, mother, I am foolish enough to have become attached to a young girl, and I blame myself for it. I do all I can not to think of her; but whether I am at work or resting, whether I am at Mass or in my bed, with my children or with you, I think of her all the time, and can't think of anything else."

"Why, it's as if there'd been a spell cast on you, Germain, isn't it? There's only one cure for it, and that is to make the girl change her mind and listen to you. So I must take a hand in it, and see if it can be done. You tell me where she lives and what her name is."

"Alas! my dear mother, I don't dare," said Germain, "for you'll laugh at me."

"No, I won't laugh at you, Germain, because you're in trouble, and I don't want to make it any worse for you. Can it be Fanchette?"

"No, mother, not her."

"Or Rosette?"

"No."

"Tell me, then, for I won't stop, if I have to name all the girls in the province."

Germain hung his head, and could not make up his mind to reply.

"Well," said Mère Maurice, "I leave you in peace for to-day, Germain; perhaps to-morrow you will feel more like trusting me, or your sister-in-law will show more skill in questioning you."

And she picked up her basket to go and stretch her linen on the bushes.

Germain acted like children who make up their minds when they see that you have ceased to pay any attention to them. He followed his mother-in-law, and at last gave her the name in fear and trembling—La Guillette's little Marie.

Great was Mère Maurice's surprise: she was the last one of whom she would have thought. But she had the delicacy not to cry out at it, and to make her comments mentally. Then, seeing that her silence was oppressive to Germain, she held out her basket to him, saying: "Well, is that any reason why you shouldn't help me in my work? Carry this load, and come and talk with me. Have you reflected, Germain? have you made up your mind?"

"Alas! my dear mother, that's not the way you must talk: my mind would be made up if I could succeed; but as I shouldn't be listened to, I have made up my mind simply to cure myself if I can."

"And if you can't?"

"Everything in its time, Mère Maurice: when the horse is overloaded, he falls; and when the ox has nothing to eat, he dies."

"That is to say that you will die if you don't succeed, eh? God forbid, Germain! I don't like to hear a man like you say such things as that, because when he says them he thinks them. You're a very brave man, and weakness is a dangerous thing in

strong men. Come, take hope. I can't imagine how a poor girl, who is much honored by having you want her, can refuse you."

"It's the truth, though, she does refuse me."

"What reasons does she give you?"

"That you have always been kind to her, that her family owes a great deal to yours, and that she doesn't want to displease you by turning me away from a wealthy marriage."

"If she says that, she shows good feeling, and it's very honest on her part. But when she tells you that, Germain, she doesn't cure you, for she tells you she loves you, I don't doubt, and that she'd marry you if we were willing."

"That's the worst of it! she says that her heart isn't drawn toward me."

"If she says what she doesn't mean, the better to keep you away from her, she's a child who deserves to have us love her and to have us overlook her youth because of her great common-sense."

"Yes," said Germain, struck with a hope he had not before conceived; "it would be very good and very comme il faut on her part! but if she's so sensible, I am very much afraid it's because she doesn't like me."

"Germain," said Mère Maurice, "you must promise to keep quiet the whole week and not worry, but eat and sleep, and be gay as you used to be. I'll speak to my old man, and if I bring him round, then you can find out the girl's real feeling with regard to you."

Germain promised, and the week passed without Père Maurice saying a word to him in private or giving any sign that he suspected anything. The ploughman tried hard to seem tranquil, but he was paler and more perturbed than ever.

XVII

LITTLE MARIE

At last, on Sunday morning as they came out from Mass, his mother-in-law asked him what he had obtained from his sweetheart since their interview in the orchard.

"Why, nothing at all," he replied. "I haven't spoken to her."

"How do you expect to persuade her, pray, if you don't speak to her?"

"I have never spoken to her but once," said Germain. "That was when we went to Fourche together; and since then I haven't said a single word to her. Her refusal hurt me so, that I prefer not to hear her tell me again that she doesn't love me."

"Well, my son, you must speak to her now; your father-in-law authorizes you to do it. Come, make up your mind! I tell you to do it, and, if necessary, I insist on it; for you can't remain in this state of doubt."

Germain obeyed. He went to Mère Guillette's, with downcast eyes and an air of profound depression. Little Marie was alone in the chimney-corner, musing so deeply that she did not hear Germain come in. When she saw him before her, she leaped from her chair in surprise and her face flushed.

"Little Marie," he said, sitting beside her, "I have pained you and wearied you, I know; but the man and the woman at our house"—so designating the heads of the family in accordance with custom—"want me to speak to you and ask you to marry me. You won't be willing to do it, I expect that."

"Germain," replied little Marie, "have you made up your mind that you love me?"

"That offends you, I know, but it isn't my fault; if you could change your mind, I should be too happy, and I suppose I don't deserve to have it so. Come, look at me, Marie, am I so very frightful?"

"No, Germain," she replied, with a smile, "you're better looking than I am."

"Don't laugh at me; look at me indulgently; I haven't lost a hair or a tooth yet. My eyes tell you that I love you. Look into my eyes, it's written there, and every girl

knows how to read that writing."

Marie looked into Germain's eyes with an air of playful assurance; then she suddenly turned her head away and began to tremble.

"Ah! mon Dieu! I frighten you," said Germain; "you look at me as if I were the farmer of Ormeaux. Don't be afraid of me, I beg of you, that hurts me too much. I won't say bad words to you, I won't kiss you against your will, and when you want me to go away, you have only to show me the door. Tell me, must I go out so that you can stop trembling?"

Marie held out her hand to the ploughman, but without turning her head, which was bent toward the fire-place, and without speaking.

"I understand," said Germain; "you pity me, for you are kind-hearted; you are sorry to make me unhappy; but still you can't love me, can you?"

"Why do you say such things to me, Germain?" little Marie replied at last, "do you want to make me cry?"

"Poor little girl, you have a kind heart, I know; but you don't love me, and you hide your face from me because you're afraid to let me see your displeasure and your repugnance. And for my part, I don't dare do so much as press your hand! In the woods, when my son was asleep, and you were asleep too, I came near kissing you softly. But I should have died of shame rather than ask you for a kiss, and I suffered as much that night as a man roasting over a slow fire. Since then, I've dreamed of you every night. Ah! how I have kissed you, Marie! But you slept without dreaming all the time. And now do you know what I think? that if you should turn and look at me with such eyes as I have for you, and if you should put your face to mine, I believe I should fall dead with joy. And as for you, you are thinking that if such a thing should happen to you, you would die of anger and shame!"

Germain talked as if he were dreaming, and did not know what he said. Little Marie was still trembling; but as he was trembling even more than she, he did not notice it.

Suddenly she turned; she was all in tears, and looked at him with a reproachful expression.

The poor ploughman thought that that was the last stroke, and rose to go, without awaiting his sentence, but the girl detained him by throwing her arms about him, and hid her face against his breast.

"Ah! Germain," she said, sobbing, "haven't you guessed that I love you?"

Germain would have gone mad, had not his son, who was looking for him and who entered the cottage galloping on a stick, with his little sister en croupe, lashing the imaginary steed with a willow switch, recalled him to himself. He lifted him up, and said, as he put him in his fiancée's arms:

"You have made more than one person happy by loving me!"

APPENDIX

I

THE COUNTRY WEDDING

Here ends the story of Germain's courtship, as he told it to me himself, cunning ploughman that he is! I ask your pardon, dear reader, for having been unable to translate it better; for the old-fashioned, artless language of the peasants of the district that I sing—as they used to say—really has to be translated. Those people speak too much French for us, and the development of the language since Rabelais and Montaigne has deprived us of much of the old wealth. It is so with all progress, and we must make up our minds to it. But it is pleasant still to hear those picturesque idioms in general use on the old soil of the centre of France; especially as they are the genuine expressions of the mockingly tranquil and pleasantly loquacious

character of the people who use them. Touraine has preserved a considerable number of precious patriarchal locutions. But Touraine has progressed rapidly in civilization during and since the Renaissance. It is covered with châteaux, roads, activity, and foreigners. Berry has remained stationary, and I think that, next to Bretagne and some provinces in the extreme south of France, it is the most conservative province to be found at the present moment. Certain customs are so strange, so curious, that I hope to be able to entertain you a moment longer, dear reader, if you will permit me to describe in detail a country wedding, Germain's for instance, which I had the pleasure of attending a few years ago.

For everything passes away, alas! In the short time that I have lived, there has been more change in the ideas and customs of my village than there was for centuries before the Revolution. Half of the Celtic, pagan, or Middle-Age ceremonials that I saw in full vigor in my childhood, have already been done away with. Another year or two, perhaps, and the railroads will run their levels through our deep valleys, carrying away, with the swiftness of lightning, our ancient traditions and our wonderful legends.

It was in winter, not far from the Carnival, the time of year when it is considered becoming and proper, among us, to be married. In the summer, we hardly have time, and the work on a farm cannot be postponed three days, to say nothing of the extra days required for the more or less laborious digestion attending the moral and physical intoxication that follows such a festivity.—I was sitting under the huge mantel-piece of an old-fashioned kitchen fire-place, when pistol-shots, the howling of dogs, and the shrill notes of the bagpipe announced the approach of the fiancés. Soon Père and Mère Maurice, Germain, and little Marie, followed by Jacques and his wife, the nearest relations of the bride and groom, and their godfathers and godmothers, entered the court-yard.

Little Marie, not having as yet received the wedding-gifts, called livrées, was

dressed in the best that her modest wardrobe afforded: a dress of dark-gray cloth, a white fichu with large bright-colored flowers, an apron of the color called incarnat, an Indian red then much in vogue but despised to-day, a cap of snow-white muslin and of the shape, fortunately preserved, which recalls the head-dress of Anne Boleyn and Agnès Sorel. She was fresh and smiling, and not at all proud, although she had good reason to be. Germain was beside her, grave and deeply moved, like the youthful Jacob saluting Rachel at Laban's well. Any other girl would have assumed an air of importance and a triumphant bearing; for in all ranks of life it counts for something to be married for one's beaux yeux. But the girl's eyes were moist and beaming with love; you could see that she was deeply smitten, and that she had no time to think about the opinions of other people. She had not lost her little determined manner; but she was all sincerity and good nature; there was nothing impertinent in her success, nothing personal in her consciousness of her strength. I never saw such a sweet fiancée as she when she quickly answered some of her young friends who asked her if she was content: "Bless me! indeed I am! I don't complain of the good Lord."

Père Maurice was the spokesman; he had come to offer the customary compliments and invitations. He began by fastening a laurel branch adorned with ribbons to the mantel-piece; that is called the exploit, that is to say, the invitation; then he gave to each of the guests a little cross made of a bit of blue ribbon crossed by another bit of pink ribbon; the pink for the bride, the blue for the groom; and the guests were expected to keep that token to wear on the wedding-day, the women in their caps, the men in their button-holes. It was the ticket of admission.

Then Père Maurice delivered his speech. He invited the master of the house and all his company, that is to say, all his children, all his relations, all his friends, all his servants, to the marriage-ceremony, to the feast, to the sports, to the dancing, and to everything that comes after. He did not fail to say:—I come to do you the honor to invite you. A very proper locution, although it seems a misuse of words to us, as it

expresses the idea of rendering honor to those who are deemed worthy thereof.

Despite the general invitation carried thus from house to house throughout the parish, good-breeding, which is extremely conservative among the peasantry, requires that only two persons in each family should take advantage of it,—one of the heads of the family to represent the household, one of their children to represent the other members.

The invitations being delivered, the fiancés and their relations went to the farm and dined together.

Little Marie tended her three sheep on the common land, and Germain turned up the ground as if there were nothing in the air.

On the day before that fixed for the marriage, about two o'clock in the afternoon, the musicians arrived, that is to say, the bagpipers and viol-players, with their instruments decorated with long floating ribbons, and playing a march written for the occasion, in a measure somewhat slow for the feet of any but natives, but perfectly adapted to the nature of the heavy ground and the hilly roads of that region. Pistol-shots, fired by youths and children, announced the beginning of the ceremony. The guests assembled one by one and danced on the greensward in front of the house, for practice. When night had come, they began to make strange preparations: they separated into two parties, and when it was quite dark, they proceeded to the ceremony of the livrées.

That ceremony was performed at the home of the fiancée, La Guillette's cabin. La Guillette took with her her daughter, a dozen or more young and pretty shepherdesses, her daughter's friends or relations, two or three respectable matrons, neighbors with well-oiled tongues, quick at retort, and unyielding observers of the ancient customs. Then she selected a dozen sturdy champions, her relations and friends; and, lastly, the old hemp-beater of the parish, a fine and fluent talker, if ever there was one.

The rôle played in Bretagne by the bazvalan, or village tailor, is assumed in our country districts by the hemp-beater or the wool-carder, the two professions being often united in a single person. He attends all solemnities, sad or gay, because he is essentially erudite and a fine speaker, and on such occasions it is always his part to act as spokesman in order that certain formalities that have been observed from time immemorial may be worthily performed. The wandering trades which take men into the bosoms of other families and do not permit them to concentrate their attention upon their own, are well calculated to make them loquacious, entertaining, good talkers, and good singers.

The hemp-beater is peculiarly sceptical. He and another rustic functionary, of whom we shall speak anon, the grave-digger, are always the strong-minded men of the neighborhood. They have talked so much about ghosts, and are so familiar with all the tricks of which those mischievous spirits are capable, that they fear them hardly at all. Night is the time when all three, hemp-beaters, grave-diggers, and ghosts, principally exercise their callings. At night, too, the hemp-beater tells his harrowing tales. May I be pardoned for a slight digression.

When the hemp has reached the proper point, that is to say, when it has been sufficiently soaked in running water and half dried on the bank, it is carried to the yards of the different houses; there they stand it up in little sheaves, which, with their stalks spread apart at the bottom and their heads tied together in balls, greatly resemble, in the dark, a long procession of little white phantoms, planted on their slim legs and walking noiselessly along the walls.

At the end of September, when the nights are still warm, they begin the process of beating, by the pale moonlight. During the day, the hemp has been heated in the oven; it is taken out at night to be beaten hot. For that purpose, they use a sort of wooden horse, surmounted by a wooden lever, which, falling upon the grooves, breaks the plant without cutting it. Then it is that you hear at night, in the country,

the sharp, clean-cut sound of three blows struck in rapid succession. Then there is silence for a moment; that means that the arm is moving the handful of hemp, in order to break it in another place. And the three blows are repeated; it is the other arm acting on the lever, and so it goes on until the moon is dimmed by the first rays of dawn. As this work is done only a few days in the year, the dogs do not become accustomed to it, and howl plaintively at every point of the compass.

It is the time for unusual and mysterious noises in the country. The migrating cranes fly southward at such a height that the eye can hardly distinguish them in broad daylight. At night, you can only hear them; and their hoarse, complaining voices, lost among the clouds, seem like the salutation and the farewell of souls in torment, striving to find the road to heaven and compelled by an irresistible fatality to hover about the abodes of men, not far from earth; for these migratory birds exhibit strange uncertainty and mysterious anxiety in their aerial wanderings. It sometimes happens that they lose the wind, when fitful breezes struggle for the mastery or succeed one another in the upper regions. Thereupon, when one of those reverses happens during the day, we see the leader of the line soar at random through the air, then turn sharply about, fly back, and take his place at the rear of the triangular phalanx, while a skilful manoeuvre on the part of his companions soon brings them into line behind him. Often, after vain efforts, the exhausted leader abandons the command of the caravan; another comes forward, takes his turn at the task, and gives place to a third, who finds the current and leads the host forward in triumph. But what shrieks, what reproaches, what remonstrances, what fierce maledictions or anxious questions are exchanged by those winged pilgrims in an unfamiliar tongue!

In the resonant darkness you hear the dismal uproar circling above the houses sometimes for a long while; and as you can see nothing, you feel, in spite of yourself, a sort of dread and a sympathetic uneasiness until the sobbing flock has passed out of hearing in space.

There are other sounds that are peculiar to that time of year, and are heard principally in the orchards. The fruit is not yet gathered, and a thousand unaccustomed snappings and crackings make the trees resemble animate beings. A branch creaks as it bends under a weight that has suddenly reached the last stage of development; or an apple detaches itself and falls at your feet with a dull thud on the damp ground. Then you hear a creature whom you cannot see, brushing against the branches and bushes as he runs away; it is the peasant's dog, the restless, inquisitive prowler, impudent and cowardly as well, who insinuates himself everywhere, never sleeps, is always hunting for nobody knows what, watches you from his hiding-place in the bushes and runs away at the noise made by a falling apple, thinking that you are throwing a stone at him.

On such nights as those—gray, cloudy nights—the hemp-beater narrates his strange adventures with will-o'-the-wisps and white hares, souls in torment and witches transformed into wolves, the witches' dance at the cross-roads and prophetic night-owls in the grave-yard. I remember passing the early hours of the night thus around the moving flails, whose pitiless blow, interrupting the beater's tale at the most exciting point, caused a cold shiver to run through our veins. Often, too, the goodman went on talking as he worked; and four or five words would be lost: awful words, of course, which we dared not ask him to repeat, and the omission of which imparted a more awe-inspiring mystery to the mysteries, sufficiently harrowing before, of his narrative. In vain did the servants warn us that it was very late to remain out-of-doors, and that the hour for slumber had long since struck for us; they themselves were dying with longing to hear more. And with what terror did we afterward walk through the hamlet on our homeward way! how deep the church porch seemed, and how dense and black the shadow of the old trees! As for the grave-yard, that we did not see; we closed our eyes as we passed it.

But the hemp-beater does not devote himself exclusively to frightening his hearers any more than the sacristan does; he likes to make them laugh, he is jocose and

sentimental at need, when love and marriage are to be sung; he it is who collects and retains in his memory the most ancient ballads and transmits them to posterity. He it is, therefore, who, at wedding-festivals, is entrusted with the character which we are to see him enact at the presentation of the livrées to little Marie.

II

THE LIVRÉES

When everybody was assembled in the house, the doors and windows were closed and fastened with the greatest care; they even barricaded the loop-hole in the attic; they placed boards, trestles, stumps, and tables across all the issues as if they were preparing to sustain a siege; and there was the solemn silence of suspense in that fortified interior until they heard in the distance singing and laughing, and the notes of the rustic instruments. It was the bridegroom's contingent, Germain at the head, accompanied by his stoutest comrades, by his relations, friends, and servants and the grave-digger,—a substantial, joyous procession.

But, as they approached the house, they slackened their pace, took counsel together, and became silent. The maidens, shut up in the house, had arranged little cracks at the windows, through which they watched them march up and form in battle-array. A fine, cold rain was falling, and added to the interest of the occasion, while a huge fire was crackling on the hearth inside. Marie would have liked to abridge the inevitable tedious length of this formal siege; she did not like to see her lover catching cold, but she had no voice in the council under the circumstances, and, indeed, she was expected to join, ostensibly, in the mischievous cruelty of her companions.

When the two camps were thus confronted, a discharge of fire-arms without created great excitement among all the dogs in the neighborhood. Those of the household

rushed to the door barking vociferously, thinking that a real attack was in progress, and the small children, whom their mothers tried in vain to reassure, began to tremble and cry. The whole scene was so well played that a stranger might well have been deceived by it and have considered the advisability of preparing to defend himself against a band of brigands.

Thereupon, the grave-digger, the bridegroom's bard and orator, took his place in front of the door, and, in a lugubrious voice, began the following dialogue with the hemp-beater, who was stationed at the small round window above the same door:

THE GRAVE-DIGGER.

Alas! my good people, my dear parishioners, for the love of God open the door.

THE HEMP-BEATER.

Who are you, pray, and why do you presume to call us your dear parishioners? We do not know you.

THE GRAVE-DIGGER.

We are honest folk in sore distress. Be not afraid of us, my friends! receive us hospitably. The rain freezes as it falls, our poor feet are frozen, and we have come such a long distance that our shoes are split.

THE HEMP-BEATER.

If your shoes are split, you can look on the ground; you will surely find osier withes to make arcelets [little strips of iron in the shape of bows, with which shoes (wooden) were mended].

THE GRAVE-DIGGER.

Osier arcelets are not very strong. You are making sport of us, good people, and you would do better to open the door to us. We can see the gleam of a noble blaze within your house; doubtless the spit is in place, and your hearts and your stomachs are rejoicing together. Open, then, to poor pilgrims, who will die at your door if you do

not have mercy on them.

THE HEMP-BEATER.

Aha! you are pilgrims? you did not tell us that. From what pilgrimage are you returning, by your leave?

THE GRAVE-DIGGER.

We will tell you that when you have opened the door, for we come from so far away that you would not believe it.

THE HEMP-BEATER.

Open the door to you? indeed! we should not dare trust you. Let us see: are you from Saint-Sylvain de Pouligny?

THE GRAVE-DIGGER.

We have been to Saint-Sylvain de Pouligny, but we have been farther than that.

THE HEMP-BEATER.

Then you have been as far as Sainte-Solange?

THE GRAVE-DIGGER.

We have been to Sainte-Solange, for sure; but we have been farther still.

THE HEMP-BEATER.

You lie; you have never been as far as Sainte-Solange.

THE GRAVE-DIGGER.

We have been farther, for we have just returned from Saint-Jacques de Compostelle.

THE HEMP-BEATER.

What foolish tale are you telling us? We don't know that parish. We see plainly enough that you are bad men, brigands, nobodies, liars. Go somewhere else and sing your silly songs; we are on our guard, and you won't get in here.

THE GRAVE-DIGGER.

Alas! my dear man, have pity on us! We are not pilgrims, as you have rightly guessed; but we are unfortunate poachers pursued by the keepers. The gendarmes are after us, too, and, if you don't let us hide in your hay-loft, we shall be caught and taken to prison.

THE HEMP-BEATER.

But what proof have we this time that you are what you say? for here is one falsehood already that you could not follow up.

THE GRAVE-DIGGER.

If you will open the door, we will show you a fine piece of game we have killed.

THE HEMP-BEATER.

Show it now, for we are suspicious.

THE GRAVE-DIGGER.

Well, open a door or a window, so that we can pass in the creature.

THE HEMP-BEATER.

Oh! nay, nay! not such fools! I'm looking at you through a little hole, and I see neither hunters nor game.

At that point, a drover's boy, a thick-set youth of herculean strength, came forth from the group in which he had been standing unnoticed, and held up toward the window a goose all plucked and impaled on a stout iron spit, decorated with bunches of straw and ribbons.

"Hoity-toity!" cried the hemp-beater, after he had cautiously put out an arm to feel the bird; "that's not a quail or a partridge, a hare or a rabbit; it looks like a goose or a turkey. Upon my word, you are noble hunters! and that game did not make you ride very fast. Go elsewhere, my knaves! all your falsehoods are detected, and you may as well go home and cook your supper. You won't eat ours."

THE GRAVE-DIGGER.

Alas! mon Dieu! where shall we go to have our game cooked? it's very little among so many of us; and, besides, we have no fire nor place to go to. At this time of night, every door is closed, everybody has gone to bed; you are the only ones who are having a wedding-feast in your house, and you must be very hardhearted to leave us to freeze outside. Once more, good people, let us in; we won't cause you any expense. You see we bring our own food; only a little space at your fireside, a little fire to cook it, and we will go hence satisfied.

THE HEMP-BEATER.

Do you think that we have any too much room, and that wood costs nothing?

THE GRAVE-DIGGER.

We have a little bundle of straw to make a fire with, we will be satisfied with it; only give us leave to place the spit across your fire-place.

THE HEMP-BEATER.

We will not do it; you arouse disgust, not pity, in us. It's my opinion that you are drank, that you need nothing, and that you simply want to get into our house to steal our fire and our daughters.

THE GRAVE-DIGGER.

As you refuse to listen to any good reason, we propose to force our way into your house.

THE HEMP-BEATER.

Try it, if you choose. We are so well protected that we need not fear you. You are insolent knaves, too, and we won't answer you any more.

Thereupon, the hemp-beater closed the window-shutter with a great noise, and went down to the lower room by a ladder. Then he took the bride by the hand, the young people of both sexes joined them, and they all began to dance and utter joyous exclamations, while the matrons sang in piercing tones and indulged in loud peals of

laughter in token of their scorn and defiance of those who were attempting an assault without.

The besiegers, on their side, raged furiously together: they discharged their pistols against the doors, made the dogs growl, pounded on the walls, rattled the shutters, and uttered terror-inspiring yells; in short, there was such an uproar that you could not hear yourself talk, such a dust and smoke that you could not see yourself.

The attack was a mere pretence, however: the moment had not come to violate the laws of etiquette. If they could succeed, by prowling about the house, in finding an unguarded passage, any opening whatsoever, they could try to gain an entrance by surprise, and then, if the bearer of the spit succeeded in placing his bird in front of the fire, that constituted a taking possession of the hearth-stone, the comedy was at an end, and the bridegroom was victor.

But the entrances to the house were not so numerous that they were likely to have neglected the usual precautions, and no one would have assumed the right to employ violence before the moment fixed for the conflict.

When they were weary of jumping about and shouting, the hemp-beater meditated a capitulation. He went back to his window, opened it cautiously, and hailed the discomfited besiegers with a roar of laughter:

"Well, my boys," he said, "you're pretty sheepish, aren't you? You thought that nothing could be easier than to break in here, and you have discovered that our defences are strong. But we are beginning to have pity on you, if you choose to submit and accept our conditions."

THE GRAVE-DIGGER.

Speak, my good friends; tell us what we must do to be admitted to your fireside.

THE HEMP-BEATER.

You must sing, my friends, but sing some song that we don't know, and that we can't

answer with a better one.

"Never you fear!" replied the grave-digger, and he sang in a powerful voice:

"'Tis six months since the spring-time,"

"When I walked upon the springing grass," replied the hemp-beater, in a somewhat hoarse but awe-inspiring voice. "Are you laughing at us, my poor fellows, that you sing us such old trash? you see that we stop you at the first word."

"It was a prince's daughter—"

"And she would married be" replied the hemp-beater. "Go on, go on to another! we know that a little too well."

THE GRAVE-DIGGER.

What do you say to this:

"When from Nantes I was returning—"

THE HEMP-BEATER.

"I was weary, do you know! oh! so weary." That's a song of my grandmother's day. Give us another one.

THE GRAVE-DIGGER.

"The other day as I was walking—"

THE HEMP-BEATER.

"Along by yonder charming wood!" That's a silly one! Our grandchildren wouldn't take the trouble to answer you! What! are those all you know?

THE GRAVE-DIGGER.

Oh! we'll sing you so many of them, that you will end by stopping short.

Fully an hour was passed in this contest. As the two combatants were the most learned men in the province in the matter of ballads, and as their repertory seemed inexhaustible, it might well have lasted all night, especially as the hemp-beater

seemed to take malicious pleasure in allowing his opponent to sing certain laments in ten, twenty, or thirty stanzas, pretending by his silence to admit that he was defeated. Thereupon, there was triumph in the bridegroom's camp, they sang in chorus at the tops of their voices, and every one believed that the adverse party would make default; but when the final stanza was half finished, the old hemp-beater's harsh, hoarse voice would bellow out the last words; whereupon he would shout: "You don't need to tire yourselves out by singing such long ones, my children! We have them at our fingers' ends!"

Once or twice, however, the hemp-beater made a wry face, drew his eyebrows together, and turned with a disappointed air toward the observant matrons. The grave-digger was singing something so old that his adversary had forgotten it, or perhaps had never known it; but the good dames instantly sang the victorious refrain through their noses, in tones as shrill as those of the sea-gull; and the grave-digger, summoned to surrender, passed to something else.

It would have been too long to wait until one side or the other won the victory. The bride's party announced that they would show mercy on condition that the others should offer her a gift worthy of her.

Thereupon, the song of the livrées began, to an air as solemn as a church chant.

The men outside sang in unison:

"Ouvrez la porte, ouvrez, Marie, ma mignonne, J'ons de beaux cadeaux à vous présenter. Hélas! ma mie, laissez-nous entrer."[3]

To which the women replied from the interior, in falsetto, in doleful tones:

"Mon père est en chagrin, ma mère en grand' tristesse, Et moi je suis fille de trop grand' merci Pour ouvrir ma porte à cette heure ici."[4]

The men repeated the first stanza down to the fourth line, which they modified thus:

"J'ons un beau mouchoir à vous présenter."[5]

But the women replied, in the name of the bride, in the same words as before.

Through twenty stanzas, at least, the men enumerated all the gifts in the livrée, always mentioning a new article in the last verse: a beautiful devanteau,—apron,—lovely ribbons, a cloth dress, lace, a gold cross, even to a hundred pins to complete the bride's modest outfit. The matrons invariably refused; but at last the young men decided to mention a handsome husband to offer, and they replied by addressing the bride, and singing to her with the men:

"Ouvrez la porte, ouvrez, Marie, ma mignonne, C'est un beau man qui vient vous chercher. Allons, ma mie, laissons-les entrer."[6]

III

THE WEDDING

The hemp-beater at once drew the wooden latch by which the door was fastened on the inside; at that time, it was still the only lock known in most of the houses in our village. The bridegroom's party invaded the bride's dwelling, but not without a combat; for the boys stationed inside the house, and even the old hemp-beater and the old women, made it their duty to defend the hearthstone. The bearer of the spit, supported by his adherents, was bound to succeed in bestowing his bird in the fire-place. It was a genuine battle, although they abstained from striking one another, and there was no anger in it. But they pushed and squeezed one another with such violence, and there was so much self-esteem at stake in that conflict of muscular strength, that the results might be more serious than they seemed to be amid the laughter and the singing. The poor old hemp-beater, who fought like a lion, was pressed against the wall and squeezed until he lost his breath. More than one champion was floored and unintentionally trodden under foot, more than one hand that grasped at the spit was covered with blood. Those sports are dangerous, and the

accidents were so serious in later years that the peasants determined to allow the ceremony of the livrées to fall into desuetude. I believe that we saw the last of it at Françoise Meillant's wedding, and still it was only a mock-battle.

The contest was animated enough at Germain's wedding. It was a point of honor on one side and the other to attack and to defend La Guillette's fireside. The huge spit was twisted like a screw in the powerful hands that struggled for possession of it. A pistol-shot set fire to a small store of hemp in skeins that lay on a shelf suspended from the ceiling. That incident created a diversion, and while some hastened to smother the germ of a conflagration, the grave-digger, who had climbed to the attic unperceived, came down the chimney and seized the spit, just as the drover, who was defending it near the hearth, raised it above his head to prevent its being snatched from him. Some time before the assault, the matrons had taken care to put out the fire, fearing that some one might fall in and be burned while they were struggling close beside it. The facetious grave-digger, in concert with the drover, possessed himself of the trophy without difficulty, therefore, and threw it across the fire-dogs. It was done! No one was allowed to touch it after that. He leaped into the room, and lighted a bit of straw which surrounded the spit, to make a pretence of cooking the goose, which was torn to pieces and its limbs strewn over the floor.

Thereupon, there was much laughter and burlesque discussion. Every one showed the bruises he had received, and as it was often the hand of a friend that had dealt the blow, there was no complaining or quarrelling. The hemp-beater, who was half flattened out, rubbed his sides, saying that he cared very little for that, but that he did protest against the stratagem of his good friend the grave-digger, and that, if he had not been half-dead, the hearth would not have been conquered so easily. The matrons swept the floor, and order was restored. The table was covered with jugs of new wine. When they had drank together and recovered their breath, the bridegroom was led into the centre of the room, and, being armed with a staff, was obliged to submit to a new test.

During the contest, the bride had been concealed with three of her friends by her mother, her godmother, and aunts, who had seated the four girls on a bench in the farthest corner of the room, and covered them over with a great white sheet. They had selected three of Marie's friends who were of the same height as she, and wore caps of exactly the same height, so that, as the sheet covered their heads and descended to their feet, it was impossible to distinguish them from each other.

The bridegroom was not allowed to touch them, except with the end of his wand, and only to point out the one whom he judged to be his wife. They gave him time to examine them, but only with his eyes, and the matrons, who stood by his side, watched closely to see that there was no cheating. If he made a mistake, he could not dance with his betrothed during the evening, but only with her whom he had chosen by mistake.

Germain, finding himself in the presence of those phantoms enveloped in the same winding-sheet, was terribly afraid of making a mistake; and, as a matter of fact, that had happened to many others, for the precautions were always taken with scrupulous care. His heart beat fast. Little Marie tried to breathe hard and make the sheet move, but her mischievous rivals did the same, pushed out the cloth with their fingers, and there were as many mysterious signs as there were girls under the veil. The square caps kept the veil so perfectly level that it was impossible to distinguish the shape of a head beneath its folds.

Germain, after ten minutes of hesitation, closed his eyes, commended his soul to God, and stuck his staff out at random. He touched little Marie's forehead, and she threw the sheet aside with a cry of triumph. He obtained leave then to kiss her, and, taking her in his strong arms, he carried her to the middle of the room, and with her opened the ball, which lasted until two o'clock in the morning.

Then they separated to meet again at eight o'clock. As there was a considerable number of young people from the neighboring towns, and as there were not beds

enough for everybody, each invited guest among the women of the village shared her bed with two or three friends, while the young men lay pell-mell on the hay in the loft at the farm. You can imagine that there was not much sleep there, for they thought of nothing but teasing, and playing tricks on one another and telling amusing stories. At all weddings, there are three sleepless nights, which no one regrets.

At the hour appointed for setting out, after they had eaten their soup au lait seasoned with a strong dose of pepper to give them an appetite, for the wedding-banquet bade fair to be abundant, they assembled in the farm-yard. Our parish church being suppressed, they were obliged to go half a league away to receive the nuptial benediction. It was a lovely, cool day; but, as the roads were very bad, every man had provided himself with a horse, and took en croupe a female companion, young or old. Germain was mounted upon Grise, who, being well groomed, newly shod, and decked out in ribbons, pranced and capered and breathed fire through her nostrils. He went to the cabin for his fiancée, accompanied by his brother-in-law Jacques, who was mounted on old Grise and took Mère Guillette en croupe, while Germain returned triumphantly to the farm-yard with his dear little wife.

Then the merry cavalcade set forth, escorted by children on foot, who fired pistols as they ran and made the horses jump. Mère Maurice was riding in a small cart with Germain's three children and the fiddlers. They opened the march to the sound of the instruments. Petit-Pierre was so handsome that the old grandmother was immensely proud. But the impulsive child did not stay long beside her. He took advantage of a halt they were obliged to make, when they had gone half the distance, in order to pass a difficult ford, to slip down and ask his father to take him up on Grise in front of him.

"No, no!" said Germain, "that will make people say unkind things about us! you mustn't do it."

"I care very little what the people of Saint-Chartier say," said little Marie. "Take him, Germain, I beg you; I shall be prouder of him than of my wedding-dress."

Germain yielded the point, and the handsome trio dashed forward at Grise's proudest gallop.

And, in fact, the people of Saint-Chartier, although very satirical and a little inclined to be disagreeable in their intercourse with the neighboring parishes which had been combined with theirs, did not think of laughing when they saw such a handsome bridegroom and lovely bride, and a child that a king's wife would have envied. Petit-Pierre had a full coat of blue-bottle colored cloth, and a cunning little red waistcoat so short that it hardly came below his chin. The village tailor had made the sleeves so tight that he could not put his little arms together. And how proud he was! He had a round hat with a black and gold buckle and a peacock's feather protruding jauntily from a tuft of Guinea-hen's feathers. A bunch of flowers larger than his head covered his shoulder, and ribbons floated down to his feet. The hemp-beater, who was also the village barber and wig-maker, had cut his hair in a circle, covering his head with a bowl and cutting off all that protruded, an infallible method of guiding the scissors accurately. Thus accoutred, he was less picturesque, surely, than with his long hair flying in the wind and his lamb's fleece à la Saint John the Baptist; but he had no such idea, and everybody admired him, saying that he looked like a little man. His beauty triumphed over everything, and, in sooth, over what would not the incomparable beauty of childhood triumph?

His little sister Solange had, for the first time in her life, a real cap instead of the little child's cap of Indian muslin that little girls wear up to the age of two or three years. And such a cap! higher and broader than the poor little creature's whole body. And how lovely she considered herself! She dared not turn her head, and sat perfectly straight and stiff, thinking that people would take her for the bride.

As for little Sylvain, he was still in long dresses and lay asleep on his grandmother's

knees, with no very clear idea of what a wedding might be.

Germain gazed affectionately at his children, and said to his fiancée, as they arrived at the mayor's office:

"Do you know, Marie, I ride up to this door a little happier than I was the day I brought you home from the woods of Chanteloube, thinking that you would never love me; I took you in my arms to put you on the ground just as I do now, but I didn't think we should ever be together again on good Grise with this child on our knees. I love you so much, you see, I love those dear little ones so much, I am so happy because you love me and love them and because my people love you, and I love my mother and my friends and everybody so much to-day, that I wish I had three or four hearts to hold it all. Really, one is too small to hold so much love and so much happiness! I have something like a pain in my stomach."

There was a crowd at the mayor's door and at the church to see the pretty bride. Why should we not describe her costume? it became her so well. Her cap of white embroidered muslin had flaps trimmed with lace. In those days, peasant-women did not allow themselves to show a single hair; and although their caps conceal magnificent masses of hair rolled in bands of white thread to keep the head-dress in place, even in these days it would be considered an immodest and shameful action to appear before men bareheaded. They do allow themselves now, however, to wear a narrow band across the forehead, which improves their appearance very much. But I regret the classic head-dress of my time: the white lace against the skin had a suggestion of old fashioned chastity which seemed to me more solemn, and when a face was beautiful under those circumstances, it was a beauty whose artless charm and majesty no words can describe.

Little Marie still wore that head dress, and her forehead was so white and so pure that it defied the white of the linen to cast a shadow upon it. Although she had not closed her eyes during the night, the morning air, and above all things the inward joy

of a soul as spotless as the sky, and a little hidden fire, held in check by the modesty of youth, sent to her cheeks a flush as delicate as the peach-blossom in the early days of April.

Her white fichu, chastely crossed over her bosom, showed only the graceful contour of a neck as full and round as a turtle-dove's; her morning dress of fine myrtle-green cloth marked the shape of her slender waist, which seemed perfect, but was likely to grow and develop, for she was only seventeen. She wore an apron of violet silk, with the pinafore which our village women have made a great mistake in abolishing, and which imparted so much modesty and refinement to the chest. To-day, they spread out their fichus more proudly, but there is no longer that sweet flower of old-fashioned pudicity in their costume that made them resemble Holbein's virgins. They are more coquettish, more graceful. The correct style in the old days was a sort of unbending stiffness which made their infrequent smiles more profound and more ideal.

At the offertory, Germain, according to the usual custom, placed the treizain—that is to say, thirteen pieces of silver—in his fiancée's hand. He placed on her finger a silver ring of a shape that remained invariable for centuries, but has since been replaced by the band of gold. As they left the church, Marie whispered: "Is it the ring I wanted? the one I asked you for, Germain?"

"Yes," he replied, "the one my Catherine had on her finger when she died. The same ring for both my marriages."

"Thank you, Germain," said the young wife in a serious tone and with deep feeling. "I shall die with it, and if I die before you, you must keep it for your little Solange."

IV

THE CABBAGE

They remounted their horses, and rode rapidly back to Belair. The banquet was a sumptuous affair, and lasted, intermingled with dancing and singing, until midnight. The old people did not leave the table for fourteen hours. The grave-digger did the cooking, and did it very well. He was renowned for that, and he left his ovens to come and dance and sing between every two courses. And yet he was epileptic, was poor Père Bontemps. Who would have suspected it? He was as fresh and vigorous and gay as a young man. One day we found him lying like a dead man in a ditch, all distorted by his malady, just at nightfall. We carried him to our house in a wheelbarrow, and passed the night taking care of him. Three days later, he was at a wedding, singing like a thrush, leaping like a kid, and frisking about in the old-fashioned way. On leaving a marriage-feast, he would go and dig a grave and nail up a coffin. He performed those duties devoutly, and although they seemed to have no effect on his merry humor, he retained a melancholy impression which hastened the return of his attacks. His wife, a paralytic, had not left her chair for twenty years. His mother is a hundred and forty years old and is still alive. But he, poor man, so jovial and kind-hearted and amusing, was killed last year by falling from his loft to the pavement. Doubtless he was suddenly attacked by his malady, and had hidden himself in the hay, as he was accustomed to do, in order not to frighten and distress his family. Thus ended, in a tragic way, a life as strange as himself, a mixture of gloom and folly, of horror and hilarity, amid which his heart remained always kind and his character lovable.

But we are coming to the third day of the wedding-feast, which is the most interesting of all, and has been retained in full vigor down to our own day. We will say nothing of the slice of toast that is carried to the nuptial bed; that is an absurd custom which offends the modesty of the bride, and tends to destroy that of the young girls who are present. Moreover, I think that it is a custom which obtains in all the provinces and has no peculiar features as practised among us.

Chapter IV (Appendix) He fell on his knees in the furrow through which he was

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Just as the ceremony of the livrées is the symbol of the taking possession of the bride's heart and home, that of the cabbage is the symbol of the fruitfulness of the union. After breakfast on the day following the marriage-ceremony, comes this strange performance, which is of Gallic origin, but, as it passed through the hands of the primitive Christians, gradually became a sort of mystery, or burlesque morality-play of the Middle Ages.

Two youths—the merriest and most energetic of the party—disappear during the breakfast, don their costumes, and return, escorted by the musicians, dogs, children, and pistol-shots. They represent a couple of beggars, husband and wife, covered with the vilest rags. The husband is the dirtier of the two: it is vice that has degraded him; the woman is unhappy simply and debased by her husband's evil ways.

They are called the gardener and the gardener's wife, and claim to be fitted to watch and cultivate the sacred cabbage. But the husband is known by several appellations, all of which have a meaning. He is called, indifferently, the pailloux,[7] because he wears a wig made of straw or hemp, and, to hide his nakedness, which is ill protected by his rags, he surrounds his legs and a part of his body with straw. He also provides himself with a huge belly or a hump by stuffing straw or hay under his blouse. The peilloux because he is covered with peille (rags). And, lastly, the païen (heathen), which is the most significant of all, because he is supposed, by his cynicism and his debauched life, to represent in himself the antipodes of all the Christian virtues.

He arrives with his face daubed with grease and wine lees, sometimes swallowed up

in a grotesque mask. A wretched, cracked earthen cup, or an old wooden shoe, hanging by a string to his belt, he uses to ask alms in the shape of wine. No one refuses him, and he pretends to drink, then pours the wine on the ground by way of libation. At every step, he falls and rolls in the mud; he pretends to be most disgustingly drunk. His poor wife runs after him, picks him up, calls for help, tears out the hempen hair that protrudes in stringy locks from beneath her soiled cap, weeps over her husband's degradation, and reproaches him pathetically.

"You wretch!" she says, "see what your bad conduct has reduced us to! It's no use for me to spin, to work for you, to mend your clothes! you never stop tearing and soiling them. You have run through my little property, our six children are in the gutter, we live in a stable with the beasts; here we are reduced to asking alms, and you're so ugly, so revolting, so despised, that soon they will toss bread to us as they do to the dogs. Alas! my poor mondes [people], take pity on us! take pity on me! I don't deserve my fate, and no woman ever had a filthier, more detestable husband. Help me to pick him up, or else the wagons will crush him like an old broken bottle, and I shall be a widow, which would kill me with grief, although everybody says it would be great good fortune for me."

Such is the rôle of the gardener's wife and her constant lamentation throughout the play. For it is a genuine, spontaneous, improvised comedy, played in the open air, on the highways, among the fields, seasoned by all the incidents that happen to occur; and in it everybody takes a part, wedding-guests and outsiders, occupants of the houses and passers-by, for three or four hours in the day, as we shall see. The theme is always the same, but it is treated in an infinite variety of ways, and therein we see the instinct of mimicry, the abundance of grotesque ideas, the fluency, the quickness at repartee, and even the natural eloquence of our peasants.

The part of the gardener's wife is ordinarily entrusted to a slender, beardless man with a fresh complexion, who is able to give great verisimilitude to the character he

assumes and to represent burlesque despair so naturally that the spectators may be amused and saddened at the same time as by the genuine article. Such thin, beardless men are not rare in our country districts, and, strangely enough, they are sometimes the most remarkable for muscular strength.

After the wife's wretched plight is made evident, the younger wedding-guests urge her to leave her sot of a husband and divert herself with them. They offer her their arms and lead her away. Gradually she yields, becomes animated, and runs about, now with one, now with another, behaving in a scandalous way: a new moral lesson—the husband's misconduct incites and causes misconduct on the part of his wife.

The païen thereupon awakes from his drunken stupor; he looks about for his companion, provides himself with a rope and a stick, and runs after her. They lead him a long chase, they hide from him, they pass the woman from one to another, they try to keep her amused, and to deceive her jealous mate. His friends try hard to intoxicate him. At last, he overtakes his faithless spouse and attempts to beat her. The most realistic, shrewdest touch in this parody of the miseries of conjugal life, is that the jealous husband never attacks those who take his wife away from him. He is very polite and prudent with them, he does not choose to vent his wrath on any one but the guilty wife, because she is supposed to be unable to resist him.

But just as he raises his stick and prepares his rope to bind the culprit, all the men in the wedding-party interpose and throw themselves between the two. Don't strike her! never strike your wife! is the formula that is repeated to satiety in these scenes. They disarm the husband, they force him to pardon his wife and embrace her, and soon he pretends to love her more dearly than ever. He walks about arm-in-arm with her, singing and dancing, until a fresh attack of intoxication sends him headlong to the ground once more: and with that his wife's lamentations recommence, her discouragement, her pretended misconduct, the husband's jealousy, the intervention

of the bystanders, and the reconciliation. There is in all this an ingenuous, even commonplace, lesson, which savors strongly of its origin in the Middle Ages, but which always makes an impression, if not upon the bride and groom,—who are too much in love and too sensible to-day to need it,—at all events, upon the children and young girls and boys. The païen so terrifies and disgusts the girls, by running after them and pretending to want to kiss them, that they fly from him with an emotion in which there is nothing artificial. His besmeared face and his great stick—perfectly harmless, by the way—makes the youngsters shriek with fear. It is the comedy of manners in its most elementary but most impressive state.

When this farce is well under way, they prepare to go in search of the cabbage. They bring a hand-barrow, on which the païen is placed, armed with a spade, a rope, and a great basket. Four strong men carry him on their shoulders. His wife follows him on foot, the ancients come in a group behind, with grave and pensive mien; then the wedding-party falls in two by two, keeping time to the music. The pistol-shots begin again, the dogs howl louder than ever at sight of the unclean païen, thus borne in triumph. The children salute him derisively with wooden clogs tied at the ends of strings.

But why this ovation to such a revolting personage? They are marching to the conquest of the sacred cabbage, the emblem of matrimonial fecundity, and this besotted drunkard is the only man who can put his hand upon the symbolical plant. Therein, doubtless, is a mystery anterior to Christianity, a mystery that reminds one of the festival of the Saturnalia or some ancient Bacchanalian revel. Perhaps this païen, who is at the same time the gardener par excellence, is nothing less than Priapus in person, the god of gardens and debauchery,—a divinity probably chaste and serious in his origin, however, like the mystery of reproduction, but insensibly degraded by licentiousness of manners and disordered ideas.

However that may be, the triumphal procession arrives at the bride's house and

marches into her garden. There they select the finest cabbage, which is not quickly done, for the ancients hold a council and discuss the matter at interminable length, each pleading for the cabbage which seems to him the best adapted for the occasion. The question is put to a vote, and when the choice is made, the gardener fastens his rope around the stalk and goes as far away as the size of the garden permits. The gardener's wife looks out to see that the sacred vegetable is not injured in its fall. The Jesters of the wedding-party, the hemp-beater, the grave-digger, the carpenter, or the cobbler,—in a word, all those who do not work on the land, and who, as they pass their lives in other people's houses, are reputed to have and do really have more wit and a readier tongue than the simple agricultural laborers,—take their places around the cabbage. One digs a trench with the spade, so deep that you would say he was preparing to dig up an oak-tree. Another puts on his nose a drogue, made of wood or pasteboard, in imitation of a pair of spectacles: he performs the duties of engineer, comes forward, walks away, prepares a plan, overlooks the workmen, draws lines, plays the pedant, cries out that they are spoiling the whole thing, orders the work to be abandoned and resumed according to his fancy, and makes the performance as long and as absurd as he can. Is this an addition to the former programme of the ceremony, in mockery of theorists in general, for whom the ordinary peasant has the most sovereign contempt, or in detestation of land-surveyors, who control the register of lands and assess the taxes, or of the employees of the Department of Roads and Bridges, who convert common lands into highways and cause the suppression of time-worn abuses dear to the peasant heart? Certain it is that this character in the comedy is called the geometrician, and that he does his utmost to make himself unbearable to those who handle the pick and shovel.

At last, after quarter of an hour of mummery and remonstrances, so that the roots of the cabbage may not be cut and it can be transplanted without injury, while spadefuls of earth are thrown into the faces of the bystanders,—woe to him who

does not step aside quickly enough; though he were a bishop or a prince, he must receive the baptism of earth,—the païen pulls the rope, the païenne holds her apron, and the cabbage falls majestically amid the cheers of the spectators. Then the basket is brought, and the pagan couple proceed to plant the cabbage therein with all imaginable care and precautions. They pack it in fresh soil, they prop it up with sticks and strings as city florists do their superb potted camellias; they plant red apples stuck on twigs, branches of thyme, sage, and laurel all about it; they deck the whole with ribbons and streamers; they place the trophy on the hand-barrow with the paten, who is expected to maintain its equilibrium and keep it from accident, and at last they leave the garden in good order to the music of a march.

But when they come to pass through the gate, and again when they try to enter the bridegroom's yard, an imaginary obstacle bars the passage. The bearers of the barrow stumble, utter loud exclamations, step back, go forward again, and, as if they were driven back by an invisible force, seem to succumb under the burden. Meanwhile, the rest of the party laugh heartily and urge on and soothe the human team. "Softly! softly, boy! Come, courage! Look out! Patience! Stoop! The gate is too low! Close up, it's too narrow! a little to the left; now to the right! Come, take heart, there you are!"

So it sometimes happens that, in years of abundant crops, the ox-cart, laden beyond measure with fodder or grain, is too broad or too high to enter the barndoor. And such exclamations are shouted at the powerful cattle to restrain or excite them; and with skilful handling and vigorous efforts the mountain of wealth is made to pass, without mishap, beneath the rustic triumphal arch. Especially with the last load, called the gerbaude, are these precautions required; for that is made the occasion of a rustic festival, and the last sheaf gathered from the last furrow is placed on top of the load, decorated with ribbons and flowers, as are the heads of the oxen and the driver's goad. Thus the triumphal, laborious entry of the cabbage into the house is an emblem of the prosperity and fruitfulness it represents.

Arrived in the bridegroom's yard, the cabbage is taken to the highest point of the house or the barn. If there is a chimney, a gable end, a dove-cote higher than the other elevated portions, the burden must, at any risk, be taken to that culminating point. The païen accompanies it thither, fixes it in place, and waters it from a huge jug of wine, while a salvo of pistol-shots and the joyful contortions of the païenne announce its inauguration.

The same ceremony is immediately repeated. Another cabbage is dug up in the bridegroom's garden and borne with the same formalities to the roof that his wife has abandoned to go with him. The trophies remain in place until the rain and wind destroy the baskets and carry off the cabbages. But they live long enough to offer some chance of fulfilment of the prophecy that the old men and matrons utter as they salute them. "Beautiful cabbage," they say, "live and flourish, so that our young bride may have a fine little baby before the end of the year; for if you die too quickly, it will be a sign of sterility, and you will be stuck up there on top of the house like an evil omen."

The day is far advanced before all these performances are at an end. It only remains to escort the husband and wife to the godfathers and godmothers. When these putative parents live at a distance, they are escorted by the musicians and all the wedding-party to the limits of the parish. There, there is more dancing by the roadside, and they kiss the bride and groom when they take leave of them. The païen and his wife are then washed and dressed in clean clothes, when they are not so fatigued by their rôles that they have had to take a nap.

They were still dancing and singing and eating at the farm-house at Belair at midnight on the third day of the festivities attending Germain's wedding. The old men were seated at the table, unable to leave it, and for good reason. They did not recover their legs and their wits until the next day at dawn. At that time, while they sought their homes, in silence and with uncertain steps, Germain, proud and

well-content, went out to yoke his cattle, leaving his young wife to sleep until sunrise. The lark, singing as he flew upward to the sky, seemed to him to be the voice of his heart, giving thanks to Providence. The hoar-frost, glistening on the bare bushes, seemed to him the white April blossoms that precede the appearance of the leaves. All nature was serene and smiling in his eyes. Little Pierre had laughed and jumped about so much the day before, that he did not come to help him to drive his oxen; but Germain was content to be alone. He fell on his knees in the furrow through which he was about to run his plough once more, and repeated the morning prayer with such emotion that the tears rolled down his cheeks, still moist with perspiration.

In the distance could be heard the songs of the youths from the adjoining parishes, just starting for home, and repeating, in voices somewhat the worse for wear, the merry refrains of the preceding night.

NOTES

[1]

By the sweat of thy brow Thou wilt earn thy poor livelihood; After long travail and service, Lo! Death comes and calls thee.

[2]

The name applied to the road which turns aside from the main street at the entrance to a village and runs along its outskirts. It is supposed that people who fear that they may receive some merited affront will take that road to avoid being seen.—Author's Note.

[3]

Open the door, yes, open, Marie, my darling, I have beautiful gifts to offer you. Alas! my dear, pray let us in.

[4]

My father grieves, my mother's deathly sad, And I am too pitiful a daughter To open my door at such an hour.

[5]

I have a fine handkerchief to offer you.

[6]

Open the door, yes, open, Marie, my darling, 'Tis a handsome husband who comes to seek you. Come, my dear, and let us let them in.

[7]

Man of straw—from paille (straw).

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