



The Quest of Glory

Marjorie Bowen

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The Quest of Glory

Marjorie Bowen

"La gloire nous donne sur les cœurs
une autorité naturelle qui
nous touche sans doute autant
que nulle de nos sensations et nous
étourdit plus sur nos misères
qu'une vaine dissipation; elle est
donc réellement tous sens."

--Marquis De Vauvenargues

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Part I. The Quest Joyful

"Tout est tres abject dans les hommes, la vertu, la gloire, la vie; mais les choses les plus petites ont des proportions reconnues. Le chene est un grand arbre pres du cerisier; ainsi les hommes a l'égard les uns des autres."

—Le Marquis De Vau Yen Argues.

I. Prague, 1742

The Austrian guns had ceased with the early sunset, and the desolate city of Prague was silent, encompassed by the enemy and the hard, continuous cold of a Bohemian December: in the hall of Vladislav in the Hradcany, that ancient palace of ancient kings that rose above the town, several French officers wrapped in heavy cloaks were walking up and down, as they had done night after night since the dragging siege began. In the vast spaces of the huge pillarless hall with the high arched Gothic roof, bare walls and floor, imperfectly lit by a few low-placed lamps, their figures looked slight to insignificance, and the sound of their lowered voices was a mere murmur in the great frozen stillness. At one end of the hall rose a tall carved wooden throne and rows of benches divided from the main hall by a light railing; these, which had once been the seats of the King and nobility of Bohemia, were now decayed and broken, and behind the empty chair of state was thrust a Bourbon flag tied with the blue and white colours that the French carried in compliment to the Elector of Bavaria, whom they, for many intricate reasons,—some wise, and some foolish, and none just, were seeking to place on the Austrian throne as Charles II.

These officers, who were the unquestioning instruments of this policy of France, ceased talking presently and gathered round the degraded throne before which burnt a handful of charcoal over an

iron tripod. The only near light was a heavy lamp suspended before the window; a stench of rank oil and powder filled even the cold air, which rasped the throat and the nostrils and had no freshness in it but only a great lifeless chill.

There were four of these officers, and as they stood round the struggling flame that leapt and sank on the brazier, the cross lights of fire and lamp showed a great similarity in their persons. It was noticeable how totally different they were from their surroundings; no one ever would have thought that they were of the breed that had built this vast barbaric hall or carved the bold monsters on the rude throne: in every line they stood confessed foreign, alien to this crude grandeur and of another nation, another civilization, old and thrice refined.

They were all slight men, though two were tall; they all wore under their cloaks the uniforms of the famous *régiment du roi*; and they all had their hair as carefully powdered and curled and their linen as fresh and elaborate as if they were at Versailles: yet it was now several months since Prince Lobkowitz and his Hungarian Pandours had driven the French into Prague.

Their manner was as similar as their persons: a composed gaiety, an unconscious courtesy, an absolute reserve and command of emotion were as common to each as the silver epaulettes and frogs of their blue uniforms. The four faces the charcoal flame lit were proud and delicate and much alike in feature, but one was distinguished, even in that light, by the fresh attractiveness of its youthful beauty--the beauty of dark colour, of soft eyes, of rich hair that pomade could scarcely disguise, of ardent lips and eager expression that even the formality of that universal noble manner could not conceal; a face beautiful and lovable, and one that had not yet looked on twenty years.

He was the youngest as he was the tallest. His companions were much of an age and much of a height, and nothing remarkable distinguished one from the other save that one wore the gorgeous uniform of a colonel, two that of captain; the youth's rank was merely that of lieutenant. They were all silent; there was absolutely nothing to talk about. They had been shut up in Prague all the winter, and though they could easily have broken through the loose ranks of the unskilful besiegers, all thought of leaving the city was impossible until the spring. Bohemia was ice from end to end, and even in the encampment in Prague the Frenchmen died of cold.

The siege was almost without incident and quite without excitement; the Austrians made no attempt to take the city by storm, and the French made no sallies. News of the outside war was their one diversion: all Europe was in arms; Spain and England had been the last to march on to the universal battle-field; France was but one member of a coalition that endeavoured to wrest new possessions from the Empress-Queen, Maria Theresa, whom English gold and Magyar loyalty alone supported. France had signed the Pragmatic Sanction that left her heiress to her father's empire, but that promise had been lightly enough broken when France saw her advantage in allying herself with Frederick of Prussia, who, after his seizure of Silesia, had become a power in Europe. No Frenchman had any personal feeling about the war; Prussian was the same as Austrian in the eyes of most, and very few troubled to follow the ramifications of the policy that had led the Ministers who ruled in Paris to side with the effete Elector rather than the gallant Queen of Hungary in this struggle for the succession of Charles V. Therefore, with no interest in the war, little news from home, enclosed in a foreign and half-barbarous town among a people strange and mostly unfriendly, the French, during the long months of the nominal siege, were utterly overcome with weariness and a dispirited lassitude from which these four standing over the charcoal pan in the Vladislav Hall were

not wholly free.

The opening of the door at the farther end of the hall caused them all to turn with the expectancy born of monotony. Several figures entered the shadows, themselves dark and casting shadows by reason of the lantern the foremost held.

The officers moved forward. The light of dim lamp and swinging lantern was merely confusing to the sight; the advancing group threw fantastic blots of shade, and seemed to merge, subdivide, and merge again until there might have been ten people or two coming down the great bare aisle of the hall.

When the light above the throne at last flung its feeble illumination over them, it disclosed a stout Bohemian servant carrying a lantern, a young man in a splendid dress of scarlet and fur, and a woman rather clumsily muffled in a military cloak which was caught up so as to show her riding-boots and fantastic long spurs.

The officers saluted; the lady paused and looked at her companion, who returned the salute and said in good French, "We are prisoners, I believe."

"Austrians?" asked the Colonel.

"No: Poles. On our way to Paris. We were captured by the Pandours, who routed our escort, and then by a Bohemian regiment, who considered us enemies"—he smiled engagingly. "But I have induced them to allow me an audience of M. de Belleisle, who, I am certain, will allow us on our way."

"Why, doubtless," returned the Frenchman, with disinterested courtesy; "but it is severe weather for travelling, and in time of war, with a lady."

"My sister," said the young Pole, "is used to the cold, for she has lived all her life in Russia."

The lady lifted a face pale with fatigue and shadowed with anxiety; her black hair was very unbecomingly twisted tight round her head, and she wore a fur cap of fox's skin drawn down to her ears.

"I have a good reason to wish to hasten to Paris," she said. "I am summoned there by the Queen."

She made an impatient gesture to the Bohemian who conducted them, and with a weary little bow followed him through the small door that had been cut in the high blank wall.

With a more elaborate courtesy her companion followed her, his heavy tread echoing in the stillness even after the door had closed behind him.

"I wish I were bound for Paris," remarked the young Colonel, M. de Biron.

One of the captains lightly echoed his wish; the other glanced at the lieutenant and said in a very pleasing voice--

"No, M. le Duc, wish for a battle, which would suit us all better."

M. de Biron smiled.

"You are very sanguine, Luc."

"How sanguine, Monsieur?"

"You speak as if war was what it used to be in the days of Amathis de Gaul: forays, single combats, pitched battles, one cause--reward, honour, glory."

The faint smile deepened on Luc de Clapiers' face; he made no reply, but the lieutenant flushed quickly and answered--

"Pardon me, Monsieur, but it seems to me like that still." The young Duke seated himself on one of the wooden benches and crossed his slender feet.

"Even Luc," he said, with an accent of slight amusement, "cannot make this a crusade. We do not know exactly what we fight for--we respect our enemies as much as our allies; we think the Ministers fools, and know the generals jealous of each other. The country, that never wanted the war, is being taxed to death to pay for it; we"--he shrugged elegantly--"are ruining ourselves to keep ourselves in weariness and idleness. We get no thanks. I see not the least chance of promotion for any of us."

"But, Monsieur," cried the lieutenant eagerly, "you forget glory."

"Glory!" repeated M. de Biron lightly.

Luc de Clapiers flashed a profound look at him in silence; the other captain laughed.

"We are none of us," he remarked, "like to get much glory in Prague."

"Oh, hear d'Espagnac on that," returned the Duke half mockingly; "he hath not yet awakened from fairy tales."

The exquisite young face of Georges d'Espagnac blushed into a beautiful animation.

"A soldier," he said, "may find glory anywhere, Monsieur le Duc."

"In death, for instance," replied M. de Biron, with a whimsical gravity. "Yes, one might find that--any day."

"No--I meant in life," was the ardent answer. "Die--to die!" The young voice was scornful of the word. "I mean to live for France, for glory. What does it matter to me how long I stay in Prague--for what cause the war is? I march under the French flag, and that is enough. I fight for France--I am on the quest of glory, Monsieur." He paused abruptly; M. de Biron took a fan of long eagle feathers from the bench and fanned the dying charcoal into a blaze.

"A long quest," he said, not unkindly. He was thinking that he had been ten years in the army himself, and only obtained his colonelcy by reason of his rank and great influence at Court; Georges d'Espagnac, of the provincial nobility, with no friend near the King, had no bright prospects.

A little silence fell, then Luc de Clapiers spoke.

"A short or easy quest would be scarcely worth the achieving."

M. d'Espagnac smiled brilliantly and rose. "It is splendid to think there are difficulties in the world when one knows one can overcome them--fight, overcome, achieve--chase the goddess, and clasp her at last! To ride over obstacles and mount on opposition--nothing else is life!"

His dark hazel eyes unclosed widely; he looked as magnificent, as confident, as his words sounded. His cloak had fallen apart, and the last blaze of the charcoal flame gave a red glow to the silver pomp of his uniform; his face, his figure, his pose were perfect in human beauty, human pride transformed by spiritual exaltation; his soul lay like holy fire in his glance. So might St. Sebastian have looked when he came the second time to deliver himself to martyrdom.

"I give you joy of your faith," said M. de Biron.

"Oh, Monsieur, you shall give me joy of my achievement one day. I know that I am going to succeed. God did not put this passion in men for them to waste it." He spoke without embarrassment as he spoke without boasting, and with a pleasing personal modesty, as if his pride was for humanity and not for himself.

Luc de Clapiers was looking at him with eyes that shone with understanding and sympathy.

"Keep that faith of yours, d'Espagnac," he said softly; "it is the only thing in the world worth living for. Indeed, how could we live but for the hope of glory--some day?"

"I trust you may both die a Marèchal de France," remarked M. de Biron.

The charcoal sank out beyond recovery; a sudden cold blast of wind blew through the upper part of the window that had been smashed by an Austrian shell. M. de Biron rose with a shudder.

"It is warmer in the guardroom," he declared.

Luc de Clapiers spoke to the Lieutenant.

"Will you come with me to the church?"

The young man answered readily. "Certainly, Monsieur."

The Duke put his hand on the shoulder of the other captain.

"I do believe"--he smiled--"that Luc is on the same quest of glory."

II. THE CHAPEL OF ST. WENCESLAS

The two young men left the palace and proceeded rapidly, by reason of the intense cold, through the ways, covered and uncovered, that led from the royal residence to the other buildings that, ringed by half destroyed fortifications, formed the Hradcany. The night was moonless, and heavy clouds concealed the stars; lanterns placed at irregular intervals alone lit the way, but Luc de Clapiers guided his companion accurately enough to the entrance of the huge, soaring, unfinished, and yet triumphant cathedral of St. Vitus.

"You have been here before?" he asked, as they stepped into the black hollow of the porch. Though they were of the same regiment, the two had never been intimate.

"No, Monsieur," came the fresh young voice out of the dark, "and you?—I have heard you reason on the new philosophy and speak as one of those who follow M. de Voltaire—as one of those who do not believe in God."

"I do not believe that He can be confined in a church," answered Luc quietly. "Yet some churches are so beautiful that one must worship in them."

"What?" asked M. d'Espagnac, below his breath. "Glory, perhaps?"

The captain did not answer; he gently pushed open a small door to one side of the porch. A thin glow of pale-coloured light fell over his dark cloak and serene face; beyond him could be seen a glimmer like jewels veiled under water. He pulled off his beaver and entered the cathedral, followed softly by his companion. For a moment they stood motionless within the door, which slipped silently into place behind them.

The air was oppressive with the powerful perfume of strong incense, and yet even more bitterly cold than the outer night; the light was dim, flickering, rich, and luxurious, and came wholly from hanging lamps of yellow, blue, and red glass. In what appeared the extreme distance, the altar sparkled in the gleam of two huge candles of painted wax, and behind and about it showed green translucent, unsubstantial shapes of arches and pillars rising up and disappearing in the great darkness of the roof, which was as impenetrable as a starless heaven.

The church was bare of chair or pew or stool; the straight sweep of the nave was broken only by the dark outlines of princely tombs where lay the dust of former Bohemian kings and queens: their reclining figures so much above and beyond humanity, yet so startlingly like life, could be seen in the flood of ruby light that poured from the lamps above them, with praying hands and reposeful feet, patient faces and untroubled pillows on which the stately heads had not stirred for centuries.

"This is very old, this church, is it not?" whispered M. d'Espagnac.

"Old? Yes, it was built in the days of faith. This is the legend"—he turned to the left, where two lights of a vivid green cast an unearthly hue over huge bronze gates that shut off a chapel of the utmost magnificence and barbaric vividness. A brass ring hung from one of these gates, and the Frenchman put out his fair hand and touched it.

"This is the chapel of St. Wenceslas," he said. "He was a prince, and he built this church; but before it was finished his brother murdered him as he clung to this ring--and the church has never been completed."

He pushed the heavy gate open, and the two stood surrounded by the pomp and grave splendour of Eastern taste. From floor to ceiling

the walls were inlaid with Bohemian jewels set in patterns of gold; the ceiling itself was covered with ancient but still glowing frescoes; the altar was silver and gold and lumachella, the marble which holds fire, and contained vessels of crude but dazzling colour and shape in enamel, painted wood, and precious stones.

A mighty candelabrum which showed a beautiful and powerful figure of Wenceslas stood before the altar, and lit, by a dozen wax candles, the cuirass and helmet of the murdered saint, preserved in a curious case of rock crystal which rested on the altar cover of purple silk and scarlet fringing.

Above the altar hung a Flemish picture showing the murder of the Prince by the fierce Boleslav; the colours were as bright as the gems in the walls, and the faces had a lifelike look of distorted passion. A pink marble shell of holy water stood near the entrance, and the lieutenant, with the instinct of an ingrained creed, dipped in his fingers and crossed himself. Luc de Clapiers did not perform this rite, but passed to the altar rails and leant there thoughtfully, a figure in strong contrast to his background.

"M. d'Espagnac," he said, in a low, composed voice, "I liked the way you spoke to-night. Forgive me--but I too have thought as you do--I also live for glory."

At hearing these words the youth flushed with a nameless and inexpressible emotion; he came to the altar also and lowered his eyes to the mosaic pavement that sparkled in the candlelight. He had only been a year in the army and one campaign at the war; every detail of his life still had the intoxication of novelty, and these words, spoken by his captain amidst surroundings exotic as an Eastern fairy tale, fired his ardent imagination and caught his spirit up to regions of bewildering joy.

"You have everything in the world before you," continued Luc de Clapiers, and his voice, though very soft, had a note of great inner strength. "If anyone should laugh or sneer because you desire to give your life to glory, you must only pity them. M. de Biron, for instance--those people cannot understand." He moved his hand delicately to his breast and turned his deep hazel eyes earnestly on the youth. "You must not be discouraged. You are seeking for something that is in the world, something that other men have found--and won--in different ways, but by the light of the same spirit--always."

M. d'Espagnac sighed, very gently; his whitened hair and pure face were of one paleness in the ghostly, dim, mingled light of coloured lamp and flickering candle.

"I want to achieve myself," he said simply. "There is something within me which is great; therefore I feel very joyful. It is like a flame in my heart which warms all my blood; it is like wings folded to my feet which one day will open and carry me--above the earth." He paused and added, "You see I am speaking like a child, but it is difficult to find a language for these thoughts."

"It is impossible," answered Luc de Clapiers under his breath; "the holiest things in the world are those that have never been expressed. The new philosophy is as far from them as the old bigotry, and Prince Wenceslas, who died here five hundred years ago, knew as much of it as we do who are so wise, so civilized--so bewildered, after all."

The youth looked at him reverently; until to-day he had hardly noticed the silent young soldier, for Luc de Clapiers had nothing remarkable about his person or his manner.

"Monsieur, you think, then, that I shall achieve my ambitions?" Hitherto he had been indifferent to encouragement; now he felt eager

for this man's approval and confidence.

"Of course--you surely never doubt?"

"No." Georges d'Espagnac smiled dreamily. "I have done nothing yet. I have no task, no duty, no burden; there is nothing put to my hand--everything is so golden that it dazzles me. I think that will clear like dawn mists, and then I shall see what I am to do. You understand, Monsieur?"

The young captain smiled in answer.

"I brought you here to say a prayer to St. Wenceslas," he said.

M. d'Espagnac looked up at the picture above the altar.

A prince, and young; a saint, and brave; a knight, and murdered--it was an ideal to call forth admiration and sorrow. The lieutenant went on his knees and clasped his hands.

"Ah, Monsieur," he said, half wistfully, "he was murdered--a villain's knife stopped his dreams. Death is unjust"--he frowned, "if I were to die now, I should be unknown--empty-handed--forgotten. But it is not possible," he added sharply.

He drew from the bosom of his uniform a breviary in ivory with silver clasps, opened it where the leaves held some dried flowers and a folded letter, then closed it and bent his head against the altar rail as if he wept.

Luc de Clapiers went to the bronze gates and looked thoughtfully down the vast dusky aisles of the church, so cold, so alluring yet confusing to the senses, so majestic and silent.

He stood so several minutes, then turned slowly to observe the young

figure kneeling before the barbaric Christian altar.

Georges d'Espagnac had raised his face; his cloak had fallen open on the pale blue and silver of his uniform; the candle glowing on the silken, crystal-encased armour of St. Wenceslas cast a pale reflected light on to his countenance, which, always lovely in line and colour, was now transformed by an unearthly passion into an exquisite nobility.

He was absolutely still in his exalted absorption, and only the liquid lustre of his eyes showed that he lived, for his very breath seemed suppressed.

The young captain looked at him tenderly. "Beautiful as the early morning of spring," he thought, "are the first years of youth."

M. d'Espagnac rose suddenly and crossed himself.

"I would like to keep vigil here, as the knights used to," he said--his breath came quickly now. "How silent it is here and vast--and holy; an outpost of heaven, Monsieur."

His companion did not reply; he remained at the opening of the gates, gazing through the coloured lights and shadows. The world seemed to have receded from them; emotion and thought ceased in the bosom of each; they were only conscious of a sensation, half awesome, half soothing, that had no name nor expression.

The weary campaign, the monotonous round of duties, the sordid details of the war, the prolonged weeks in Prague, the fatigues, disappointments, and anxieties of their daily life--all memory of these things went from them; they seemed to breathe a heavenly air that filled their veins with delicious ardour, the silence rung with golden voices, and the great dusks of the cathedral were full of heroic

figures that lured and beckoned and smiled.

A divine magnificence seemed to burn on the distant altar, like the far-off but clearly visible goal of man's supreme ambitions, nameless save in dreams, the reward only of perfect achievement, absolute victory--the glamour of that immaculate glory which alone can satisfy the hero's highest need.

To the two young men standing on the spot where the saintly prince fell so many generations before, the path to this ultimate splendour seemed straight and easy, the journey simple, the end inevitable.

The distant mournful notes of some outside clock struck the hour, and M. d'Espagnac passed his hand over his eyes with a slight shiver; he was on duty in another few minutes.

"Au revoir, Monsieur," he said to the captain. Their eyes met; they smiled faintly and parted.

M. d'Espagnac walked rapidly and lightly towards the main door of the cathedral. He noticed now that it was very cold, with an intense, clinging chill. He paused to arrange his mantle before facing the outer air, and as he did so, saw suddenly before him a figure like his own in a heavy military cloak.

The first second he was confused, the next he recognized the Polish lady he had lately seen in the Vladislav Hall. He voiced his instinctive thought.

"Why, Madame, I did not hear the door!"

"No," she answered. "Did you not know that there was a secret passage from the palace?" She added instantly--

"What is the name of your companion, Monsieur?"

He glanced where she glanced, at the slight figure of the young captain standing by the bronze gates of the Wenceslas Chapel. He felt a shyness in answering her; her manner was abrupt, and she seemed to him an intruder in the church that had inspired such a religious mood in him. She evidently instantly perceived this, for she said, with direct haughtiness--

"I am the Countess Carola Koklinska."

M. d'Espagnac bowed and flushed. He gave his own name swiftly.

"I am the Comte d'Espagnac, lieutenant in the *régiment du roi*; my friend is Luc de Clapiers, Monsieur le Capitaine le Marquis de Vauvenargues, of the same regiment, Madame la Comtesse."

She laughed now, but in a spiritless fashion.

"Very well--I will speak to M. de Vauvenargues."

III. CAROLA KOKLINSKA

The lady waited until M. d'Espagnac had left the church, then turned directly to the gates of the Wenceslas Chapel, loosening, as she moved, the heavy folds of her great cloak.

She came so directly towards him that the Marquis could not avoid opening the gate and waiting as if he expected her, though in truth he found her sudden appearance surprising.

"This is a famous chapel, is it not?" she remarked as she reached him. She stepped into the deep glitter of the jewelled dusk, and the Marquis felt the frozen air she brought in with her--cold even in the cold. He smiled and waited. She stood a pace or two away from him,

and he could see her frosty breath.

"I am Carola Koklinska," she added. "I have been in the church some time, and I overheard what you said to your friend, M. de Vauvenargues."

He still was silent; his smile deepened slightly. She moved towards the altar and stood in the exact spot where M. d'Espagnac had knelt; with a broken sigh she shook off her mantle and cast it down on the gorgeous pavement. She was dressed in a fantastic and brilliant fashion: her long blue velvet coat, lined and edged with a reddish fur, was tied under the arms by a scarlet sash heavy with gold fringes; her crimson skirt came scarcely below her knees and showed embroidered leather riding-boots and long glimmering spurs; her coat was open at the bosom on a mass of fine lace and linen worked with gold threads; she wore coral ornaments in her ears and a long scarlet plume in her heavy cap of fox's fur; her hands were concealed in thick leather gloves embroidered with silk down the backs; in her sash were a short sword and a gold-mounted riding-whip.

The Marquis noticed these details instantly, also that the lady herself, in the setting of these strange Oriental garments, was pale and fair and delicate as a white violet nourished on snow. She exhaled a powerful perfume as of some Eastern rose or carnation: he had noticed it when she crossed the Vladislav Hall.

"You are travelling to Paris?" he asked.

"I told you," she replied, with a kind of delicate directness. "My sister is maid-of-honour to the Queen Marie Leckinska, and as she is to be married I am going to take her place. But we are delayed, it seems. M. de Belleisle advises us to stay in the Hradcany till the spring."

"Prague," said the Marquis, "is full of travellers and refugees. No one

would willingly journey this weather."

"I would, save that we have lost our sledges, our horses, our servants, our escort. Sometimes it is colder than this in Russia."

"You will find it dreary in Prague, Mademoiselle," said the Marquis kindly; "but when you reach Paris you will be recompensed."

She fixed her large, clear and light brown eyes on his face.

"I told you I had heard what you said, Monsieur. Are you usually so indifferent to eavesdroppers?"

"I said nothing that anyone might not hear--though not perhaps discuss," he answered gently.

"You mean you will not talk of these things to a woman!" she exclaimed quickly. "And I suppose I seem a barbarian to you. But perhaps I could understand as well as that young officer." Her voice was slow and sad. "I come from an heroic and unfortunate country, Monsieur. I also have dreamt of glory."

Still he would not speak; her frankness was abashed before his gentle reserve.

"I came here to attend Mass," she said hurriedly. "There is Mass here? I have not been inside a church for many weeks."

"Service is held here and well attended," he replied, "but it is yet too early."

She still kept her eyes on him.

"My brother is finding lodgings--he is to meet me here. I will stay for the Mass."

The Marquis moved just outside the bronze gates so that the light of the green lamps cast a sea-pearl glow over his person. He was looking towards the high altar, and Carola Koklinska observed him keenly.

He appeared older than his years, which were twenty-seven, and was of a delicate, though dignified and manly, bearing. A little above the medium height, he carried himself with the full majesty of youth and health and the perfect ease of nobility and a long soldier's training. His face, in its refinement, repose, and slight hauteur of composure, was typical of his nation and his rank; his expression was given a singular charm by the great sweetness of the mouth and the impression of reserved power conveyed by the deep hazel eyes, which were of a peculiarly innocent and dreamy lustre--not eyes to associate with a soldier, incongruous, indeed, with the stiff gorgeous uniform and the pomaded curls that waved loosely round his low serene forehead.

The details of his dress were fashionable and exquisite: he wore diamonds in his neckcloth and his sword-hilt was of great beauty. His manner and whole poise were so utterly calm that the Countess Carola felt it difficult to associate him with the ardent voice that had spoken to Georges d'Espagnac. He had put her very completely outside his thoughts. She winced under it as if it were a personal discourtesy.

"I regret I intruded," she said sincerely.

The Marquis gave her a look of astonishment; her open glance met his; he blushed, opened his lips to speak, but did not.

"I also can admire St. Wenceslas," she added.

She pulled off her clumsy cap, and long trails of smoke-black hair fell

untidily over her resplendent coat. She went on one knee before the altar, snatched off her gloves, and clasped above her head her small hands, which were white, stiff, and creased from the pressure of the leather.

"I have been discourteous," said the Marquis, and the ready colour heightened in his delicate cheek.

The Countess Carola took no heed; she was murmuring prayers in her own language, which to his ears sounded uncouth, but not unpleasing. He moved respectfully away. An acolyte was passing before the high altar; the door was swinging to and fro as several people--French, Bavarian, and Bohemian--entered the church for vespers.

M. de Vauvenargues looked back at the figure of the Polish lady. She appeared to be praying with a real and rather sad fervour; her strange, rich, and flamboyant dress, her disarranged hair, her attitude of supplication made her a fitting figure for the sparkling chapel; she looked more like a youth than a woman; she might have been St. Wenceslas himself just before the knife of Boleslav was plunged into his back.

The Marquis passed out into the bitter sombre night, which was filled with the ringing of the bells of many churches. He made his way along the dark terraces until he stood looking over the lights of Prague below, the still more distant fires of the Austrians, the whole windy depth of the night spread before him. Immediately beneath him he could hear the rustling of the great bare trees in the Stags Ditch. Presently the organ from the cathedral silenced these sounds and rolled out gloomily and commandingly across the darkness.

M. de Vauvenargues, of ancient family and small fortune, had been nine years in the army, had served in the Italian campaign of '32, and

had as yet met with no distinction and could foresee no hope of advancement; but it never occurred to him to doubt that the great career that filled his dreams would be one day his. He never spoke of his ambitions, yet he foresaw himself a Maréchal de France, carrying the baton with the silver lilies, riding across Europe at the head of a huge army.

Sometimes, as now, this vision was so intensely vivid that a little shiver ran through his blood and his breath choked his throat and a desire for action possessed him, so passionate that it shook his heart.

He found himself chafing--and not for the first time--at this long idleness in Prague. He felt impatient with M. de Broglie for allowing himself to be forced into the city, and impatient even with M. de Belleisle for not moving before the winter set in, for now they could not move for three, perhaps four, months.

Even if the Austrians disappeared from under the walls to-morrow it would be impossible to stir from the city in this utter severity of cold. M. de Vauvenargues saw that the generalship that had brought them to lie useless in Prague was as wrong as the policy that had offered assistance to Frederick of Prussia. He did not admire the war nor the causes that had brought it about; but he was merely one of thousands of pawns that had no choice as to where they stood.

The wind was so insistently chill that he moved from his post overlooking the town and turned, still thoughtful, towards that portion of the rambling buildings of the Hradcany where his regiment was quartered.

Before he reached it he met his colonel, M. de Biron, who caught hold of his arm rather eagerly.

"A messenger from Paris," whispered the Duke. "Came with letters to M. Belleisle--he has sent for M. de Broglie."

The second in command was not loved by the Marèchal; that they should be in consultation seemed to both the young officers as if the news from France must be serious.

"When shall we know?" asked M. de Vauvenargues.

"Not before the morning," sighed the colonel.

They entered the guardroom together: the chamber was full of the perfume of Virginian tobacco and pleasantly warm. Georges d'Espagnac was playing cards at a curious old table inlaid with ivory; his fair young face was flushed with warmth and animation and showed dazzling through the smoke wreaths.

IV. CARDINAL FLEURY'S BLUNDER

Marèchal de Belleisle lay full length on a couch of saffron-coloured satin with his head raised on a pile of silk cushions.

His room was one of the royal apartments in the Hradcany, and was most splendidly furnished with his own luxurious belongings: the floor was covered with a silk carpet; the walls hung with bright tapestry; the chairs were gilt and ash-wood; the many small tables held all manner of rich articles of gold, tortoiseshell, porcelain, and enamel, books richly bound, and caskets of sweets and preserved fruits. The light came entirely from crystal lamps suspended from gilt chains and supported by the ivory figures of flying cupids. A great clear fire burnt on the hearth, and near it was an ormolu writing-desk, on which were a few papers and a number of extravagant articles of gold and precious stones.

The Marèchal was a man of middle life with an appearance denoting great pride and energy. He wore a white and scarlet brocade dressing-gown over black breeches and waistcoat of the extreme of fashion; his feet and legs were bandaged to the knee; the upper part of his person glittered with jewels--in the seals at his watch-chain, in the heavy lace at his throat, and on his strong, smooth fingers. His face was unnaturally pale and expressed a cold despair; his full brown eyes stared in absorbed trouble across the beautiful little room; and in his right hand he tightly grasped a letter from which swung the seals of France. He moved his head with a quick breath as his valet open the door and announced--

"Monsieur le Duc de Broglie."

M. de Belleisle compressed his lips and his head sank back on the pillows again. M. de Broglie entered; the door closed behind him; he bowed and crossed to the fire.

"Be seated," said the Marèchal, with a bitter kind of courtesy.

M. de Broglie brought his handkerchief to his lips with a little cough. He was splendidly attired in full uniform, but wore his bright chestnut hair unpowdered and tied with a turquoise ribbon. He was by some years younger than the Marèchal and a man of great charm in his appearance.

"You have heard from Paris?" he asked, glancing at the letter the other held. "From M. de Fleury, Monsieur?" As he named the Minister who guided the affairs of France the Marèchal groaned. "From M. de Fleury?" he repeated, and looked sternly at the careless figure of M. de Broglie. He, the Marèchal de Belleisle, restless, ambitious, capable, confident, had planned this war. It was he who, dazzled by visions of acquiring for France a large portion of the possessions of the seemingly helpless Queen of Hungary, had

travelled from court to court of the little states of Germany animating them against Maria Theresa; it was he who had persuaded Cardinal Fleury to offer the alliance of France to Frederick of Prussia when that prince seized Silesia; and it was he who had marched the French auxiliaries across the Rhine and successfully counter-moved Prince Lobkowitz and his Hungarians during several months of uneventful warfare.

From the first he had never liked M. de Broglie; his feeling became bitter contempt when his illness left M. de Broglie in command and that General's first action was to allow himself and almost the entire French force to be cornered in Prague.

M. de Belleisle, though unable to stand or ride, had insisted on being carried into the city and reassuming his authority. Since then the relations of the two, in their open enmity, had been matter for comment to the whole army.

M. de Broglie saw, however, to-night a stronger passion than aversion to himself in the Marèchal's haggard face--saw, indeed, an expression that caused him to check the careless courtesies with which he was generally ready to vex his superior.

"I see this is serious," he remarked; "but you leave me, Monsieur, utterly at a loss."

The Marèchal made a restless movement on his sumptuous couch and half sat up, resting on his elbow. The long powdered curls that fell over his black solitaire and embroidered shirt were no more colourless than his face; his lips quivered and his eyes were narrowed as if he restrained pain.

"M. de Broglie," he said strongly, "you had better have been dead than have brought the army into Prague."

The younger General paled now; but raised his eyebrows haughtily; his right hand closed over the smooth red silk tassels of his sword.

"This is an old subject, Monsieur," he answered coldly. "I am ready to answer for my conduct at Versailles—I have told you so before."

"Versailles!" exclaimed the Marèchal grimly. "There are not many of us, Monsieur, who will see Versailles again."

M. de Broglie rose to his feet; the powerful firelight lent a false colour to his face.

"What is your news from France, Marèchal?" he asked softly.

With a fierce gesture M. de Belleisle cast down the letter he held.

"This—we are to vacate Prague and join Maillelois at Eger—on the instant."

"It is not possible," stammered M. de Broglie. The Marèchal interrupted him passionately—

"My orders are there. The old man is in his dotage. Thirty leagues to Eger along unbroken ice—a retreat in this weather, when the men are dying under my eyes even in shelter."

The Duc de Broglie was startled and shocked beyond concealment.

"It cannot be done!" he ejaculated.

"There are my orders," answered the Marèchal bitterly. "How many men does the Cardinal think I shall get to Eger? My God, it will be a disaster to make Europe stare—and the end of the war."

As he thought of the proud ambitions with which he had first meddled

in the affairs of Austria, the difficulty he had had in wringing authority from Versailles for this alliance with Frederick of Prussia, the trouble to persuade that crafty King himself to accept the dangerous protection of France--as he thought of the splendid army he had poured into Bohemia, and saw now the end of that army and of the war in a catastrophe that would make France groan--and through no fault of his own, but because of the ignorant blunder of a foolish old priest in Paris--two haughty tears forced from his eyes and rolled down his thin cheeks.

M. de Broglie was breathless as a tired runner; he put out his hand mechanically and grasped an enamelled snuffbox that lay among the frivolous trifles on the gilt desk.

"M. de Fleury does not know," he whispered, "either a Bohemian winter or the route from here to Eger."

The Marèchal fixed him with fierce wet eyes.

"You are answerable for this, M. le Duc--you and you alone--and I must pay for your careless folly."

"Monsieur," answered the other General, "I made Prague a shelter. I did not imagine that any sane man would order a retreat from it--in midwinter."

From the table near his couch M. de Belleisle took a map rudely drawn and coloured; he stared at the cross he had himself drawn which denoted Eger, the quarters of M. de Maillelois.

"Sane!" he said furiously; "no one will think we are sane. King Frederick will laugh at us and curse too. Oh, if I were in Versailles or the old Cardinal here!"

He rang the elegant bell on the table and his valet instantly appeared.

"Draw the curtains," ordered the Maréchal.

The man pulled back the soft straw-coloured silk from the blackness of the window.

"Open the casement."

The valet obeyed; a blast of frozen air set the lamp flickering.

"What manner of night is it?" asked the Maréchal. "Snowing, Monseigneur," shivered the valet.

The heavy flakes whirled in out of the darkness and settled on the polished floor; the Maréchal looked at them in a bitter absorption.

"Close the window," cried M. de Broglie; he was blenching in the deep cold that had in an instant chilled the luxurious little chamber.

The valet obeyed and again drew the beautiful curtains over the closed, barred window.

The Maréchal cast down the map on top of the letter from France and asked for wine. When it was brought M. de Broglie put it aside in silence, but M. de Belleisle drank heavily, then dropped into his cushions with a sigh of physical pain.

When the servant had left, the younger man spoke; he had recovered his composure and something of his self-confident manner.

"Do you mean to obey these orders, Monsieur?"

"I am a Maréchal de France, Monsieur le Duc, and I obey the orders of France."

Crippled by gout as he was he managed to sit upright, half supporting himself against the carved back of the couch.

"M. de Fleury speaks for France--you have been too long in Prague--abandon the town and join Maille-lois, so you may make a dash on Vienna," he gasped. "Vienna!--we shall see hell sooner."

With a quivering hand he pressed his handkerchief to his pallid lips, then wiped the damp of pain from his brow.

"But it shall be done--do not think, Monsieur, that I shirk the duty. France has spoken. You will make ready for a council to-night."

M. de Broglie shrugged his shoulders.

"You at least, M. le Marèchal, are not fit to leave Prague."

M. de Belleisle narrowed his clever eyes.

"While I can draw a breath to form a sentence I do not resign command again," he said with cold passion. The Duke bowed.

"That is as you please, Monsieur."

Their common responsibility, their mutual anxiety for a moment obscured their jealous rivalry. M. de Broglie could not restrain a little exclamation of despair.

"We shall not get ten regiments through!" he cried. The Marèchal answered, rigid with secret pain and mental anguish--

"No more words--the fiat is there; we shall leave Prague to-morrow. God have mercy on the poor devils in the ranks--fine men too," he added in spite of himself, "and, by Heaven, we *might* have stormed Vienna if I had had a chance!"

"You will hold the council here?" asked M. de Broglie.

"In my outer chamber--see to it for me, M. le Duc. I must confess that I am a sick man and something overwhelmed."

His colleague looked at him a moment, then crossed the room impulsively and kissed the hand that lay on the brocaded velvet cushions; then, with a deep obeisance, withdrew.

To reach the quarters of the aide-de-camp whose duty it would be to summon the Generals to the sudden council, M. de Broglie had to pass through the guardroom of this portion of the irregular buildings that formed the Hradcany.

Two officers of the *régiment du roi* sat by an insufficient fire; one was reading, the other, of a singular and youthful beauty, was writing a letter on a drum-head. As they rose and saluted M. de Broglie paused.

"Ah, M. de Vauvenargues," he said excitedly, "what do you read?"

"Corneille, Monsieur," answered the Marquis.

"I think you are a philosopher," returned M. de Broglie. "I will give you something to meditate upon. The army leaves Prague to-morrow."

Georges d'Espagnac looked up with a flush of joy. "Monsieur," he cried, "then it is to be action at last!" The Duke gave him a flickering look of pity.

"A retreat to Eger, my friend. I hope," he added gravely, "we shall all meet again there."

He saluted and passed on.

"Oh!" exclaimed the Marquis softly--"a retreat in mid-December."

He closed the volume of Corneille and glanced at the eager face of his companion.

They could hear the wind that swirled the snow without.

V. THE RETREAT FROM PRAGUE

The French quitted Prague on the evening of the 16th of December, leaving only a small garrison in the Hradcany; by the 18th the vanguard had reached Purgitz at the crossing of the rivers, and then the snow, that had paused for two days, commenced towards evening and the cold began to increase almost beyond human endurance.

At first their retreat had been harried by Austrian guns and charges of the Hungarian Pandours, but the enemy did not follow them far. The cannon was no longer in their ears; for twenty-four hours they marched through the silence of a barren, deserted country.

The road was now so impassable, the darkness so impenetrable, the storm so severe, the troops so exhausted that M. de Belleisle ordered a halt, though all they had for camping-ground was a ragged ravine, a strip of valley by the river, and, for the Generals, a few broken houses in the devastated village of Purgitz.

The officers of the *régiment du roi* received orders to halt as they were painfully making their way through the steep mountain paths; they shrugged and laughed and proceeded without comment to make their camp.

It was impossible to put up the tents, both by reason of the heavy

storm of snow and the rocky ground; the best they could do was to fix some of the canvas over the piled gun carriages and baggage wagons and so get men and horses into some kind of shelter.

No food was sent them, and it was too dark for any search to be made. It was impossible to find a spot dry enough to light a fire on. The men huddled together under the rocks and rested with their heads on their saddles within the feeble protection of the guns and carts.

The officers sat beneath a projecting point of rock, over which a canvas had been hastily dragged, and muffled themselves in their cloaks and every scrap of clothing they could find; behind them their horses were fastened, patient and silent.

"I am sorry," said M. de Vauvenargues, "that there are so many women and feeble folk with us."

"Another of M. de Belleisle's blunders," answered the Colonel calmly. "He should have forced them to remain in Prague."

"There was never a Protestant," remarked Lieutenant d'Espagnac, "who would remain in Prague at the mercy of the Hungarians."

The other officers were silent; it seemed to them vexatious that this already difficult retreat should be further hampered by the presence of some hundred of refugees--men, women, and children, French travellers, foreign inhabitants of Prague, Bavarians who wished to return to their own country, Hussites who were afraid of being massacred by the Pandours.

M. de Vauvenargues had it particularly in his mind; he had seen more than one dead child on the route since they left Prague. Eger was still many leagues off and both the weather and road increasing

in severity and difficulty.

"I wonder if Belleisle knew what he was doing," he remarked thoughtfully.

M. d'Espagnac laughed; his soaring spirits were not in the least cast down. He had just managed, with considerable difficulty, to light a lantern, which he hung from a dry point of rock. Its sickly ray illuminated the group and showed features a little white and pinched above the close wrapped cloaks; but Georges d'Espagnac bloomed like a winter rose. There was no trace of fatigue on his ardent countenance; he leant back against the cold grey rock under the lantern and began to hum an aria of Gluck's that had been fashionable when he last saw Paris. His hair was loosened from the ribbon and half freed from powder; it showed in streaks of bright brown through the pomade.

"There will be no moving till dawn," said M. de Biron with an air of disgust. The snow was beginning to invade their temporary shelter.

Another officer spoke impatiently.

"There must be food--many of our men have not eaten since they started. How many men does M. de Belleisle hope to get to Eger in this manner?"

There was no answer: the blast of heavy snow chilled speech. Some faint distant shouting and cries were heard, the neighing of a horse, the rumble of a cart, then silence.

Georges d'Espagnac continued his song; he seemed in a happy dream. Presently he fell asleep, resting his head against the shoulder of the other lieutenant. M. de Biron and the second captain either slept also or made a good feint of it. The Marquis rose and

took the lantern from the wall; it was unbearable to him to sit there in the darkness, amid this silent company, while there was so much to do outside. The thought of his hungry men pricked him. The food wagons must have overlooked them. It was surely possible to find some member of the commissariat department. The army could not have reached already such a pitch of confusion.

He stepped softly from under the canvas. To his great relief he found that the snow had almost ceased, but the air was glacial. As he paused, endeavouring to see his way by means of the poor rays of the lantern, his horse gave a low whinny after him. The Marquis felt another pang--the poor brutes must be hungry too. He began to descend the rocky path; he was cold even through his heavy fur mantle, and his hands were stiff despite his fur gloves. The path was wet and slippery, half frozen already, though the snow had only lain a moment.

In every crevice and hole in the rocks the soldiers were lying or sitting; many of them were wrapped in the tent canvases and horses' blankets; here and there was a dead mule with a man lying close for warmth, or a wounded trooper dying helplessly in his stiffening blood. The Marquis saw these sights intermittently and imperfectly by the wavering light of his lantern. He set his teeth; after nine years' service he was still sensitive to sights of horror.

When he reached the level ground by the river that was the principal camping ground, he stopped bewildered amidst utter confusion.

There were neither tents, nor sentries, nor outposts, merely thousands of men, lying abandoned to cold and hunger, amidst useless wagons of furniture; and as the Marquis moved slowly across the field he saw no other sight than this.

What might lie beyond the range of his lantern he could not tell, but all

he could see seemed abandoned to despair.

A man leading a mule knocked up against him; he also held a feeble lantern; his dress and the chests the mule carried showed him to be a surgeon.

"This is a pitiful sight, Monsieur," he said. "Most of the wagons were lost in that storm yesterday, and how am I to work with nothing?" He lifted his shoulders and repeated, "with nothing?"

"Is there no food?" asked the Marquis.

"In Purgitz, yes--but who is to distribute it on such a night?"

"We are like to have worse nights. Is M. de Belleisle in Purgitz?"

"And some regiments. They are in luck, Monsieur."

M. de Vauvenargues stood thoughtfully, and the surgeon passed on. Two officers rode up on horseback, attended by a soldier with a torch; the Marquis accosted them.

"Messieurs, I am Vauvenargues of the *régiment du roi*," he said. "We are encamped up the ravine, and there is no provision for men or horses--"

By the light of the torch he recognized in the foremost officer M. de Broglie, whose bright hair gleamed above a pale face.

"Marèchal," he added, "I do not know how many will be alive by the morning."

"M. de Vauvenargues!" exclaimed the General, with a faint smile. "I am helpless--absolutely helpless. The food wagons have not come up--some, I believe, are lost."

The Marquis looked at him keenly; M. de Broglie was so careless in manner that the young officer suspected he was in truth deeply troubled.

"Very well, Monsieur," he answered. "I suppose we may look for some relief with the dawn?"

"I think the orders will be to march at daybreak," answered de Broglie. He touched his beaver and rode on, first adding gravely, "Pray God it does not snow again."

The Marquis remained holding the lantern and looking at the huddled shape of men and horses. A vast pity for the waste and unseen courage of war gripped his heart; none of these men complained, the horses dropped silently, the very mules died patiently--and what was the use of it? The war was wanton, unprovoked, expensive, and, so far, a failure; it had nothing heroic in its object, which was principally to satisfy the ambitious vanity of M. de Belleisle and the vague schemes of poor old well-meaning Cardinal Fleury who had never seen a battle-field in his life.

The end seemed so inadequate to the sacrifice asked. The Marquis had seen the soldiers suffer and die in Prague with secret pangs, but this seemed a sheer devastation. It was impossible to stand still long in that cold; it was obvious that nothing could be done till the dawn. He pulled out his silver filigree watch, but it had stopped.

Slowly he moved through the camp. Now the snow had ceased, several pitiful little fires were springing up in sheltered spots; and the men were moving about in their heavy wraps, and the surgeons coming in and out the groups of wounded and sick.

A dog barked in a home-sick fashion; there was not a star visible. A Hussite pastor came within range of the Marquis's lantern; he was

carrying a limp child, and murmuring, in the strange Bohemian, what seemed a prayer.

Soon the flickering orbit of light fell on a Catholic priest kneeling beside a dying man whose face was sharp and dull. He too prayed, but the familiar Latin supplications were as outside the Marquis's sympathy as the Hussite's appeal; he was tolerant to both, but his thoughts just touched them, no more. A strange haughty sadness came over his heart; he felt disdainful of humanity that could be so weak, so cruel, so patient.

His lantern had evidently been near empty of oil, for it began to flicker and flare, and finally sank out.

He put it from him and felt his way over a pile of rocks that rose up suddenly sheer and sharp.

Nothing could be done till the dawn; it was doubtful even if he could find his way back to his own regiment. He seated himself on the rock, wrapped his cloak tightly about him, and waited.

He thought that he must be in some kind of shelter, for he did not feel the wind, and here the cold was certainly less severe.

His sombre mood did not long endure; he ceased to see the darkness filled with weary, dispirited, wounded men; rather he fancied it full of light and even flowers, which were the thoughts, he fancied, and aspirations of these poor tired soldiers.

Obedience, courage, endurance, strength blossomed rich as red roses in the hearts of the feeblest of these sons of France--and in the bosom of such as Georges d'Espagnac bloomed a very glory, as of white passion flowers at mid-summer; and in his own heart there grew enough to render the bloodstained night fragrant.

He smiled at his conceit, but it was very real to him. He had not eaten since early the previous day; he wondered if he was beginning to grow light-headed, as he had done once before in Italy when he had been without food and several hours in the sun.

The reflection brought back a sudden picture of Italy, hard, brightly-coloured, gorgeous, brilliant; he shivered with a great longing for that purple sunshine that scorched the flesh and ran in the blood.

In particular he recalled a field of wheat sloping to a sea which was like a rough blue stone for colour, and huge-leaved chestnut trees of an intense reddish green that cast a bronze shadow growing near, and the loud humming of grasshoppers persistently--no, he thought, that did not come in the wheat, but in the short dried grass, burnt gold as new clay by the sun; the sun--that sun he had scarcely seen since he left Paris.

A shuddering drowsiness overcame him; his head fell on his bosom, and he sank to sleep.

When he woke it was with a sense of physical pain and the sensation that light was falling about him in great flakes; his clearing senses told him that this was the dawn, and that he was giddy. He sat up, to find himself in a natural alcove of rock overgrown with a grey dry moss frozen and glittering; a jutting point partially shut off his vision, but he could see enough of dead men and horses and painfully moving troops in the strip of ravine immediately below him. He unfolded his cloak from his stiff limbs, and by the aid of his sword rose to his feet. As he did so, he raised his eyes, and then gave an involuntary cry of wonder and pleasure.

Immediately behind him was a silver fir, perhaps a hundred feet high, as high at least as a village steeple, rising up, branch on branch, till it tapered to a perfect finish; and in the flat topmost boughs the sun,

struggling through frowning blank grey clouds, rested with a melancholy radiance.

The Marquis had seen many such trees in Bohemia, and there was nothing extraordinary that he should, unwittingly, have slept under one; yet his breath was shaken at the sight of the tall, unspoilt beauty of this common silver fir with the sun in the upper branches, and he could not tell why.

He supported himself against the trunk and closed his eyes for a moment; his body was stabbed with pain, and his head seemed filled with restless waves of sensation. He had never been robust, and it had often been a keen trouble to him that he could not support hardship like some men, like most soldiers. He set his teeth and with an effort opened his eyes.

The first sight they met was that of a woman riding a white horse coming round the fir tree.

He knew her instantly for the Countess Koklinska, and she evidently knew him, for she reined up her horse, which she rode astride like a man, and looked down at him with a direct glance of recognition.

"I have forgotten your name," she said, "but I remember you, Monsieur. You are ill," she added.

He blushed that she should see his weakness, and mastered himself sufficiently to step to her stirrup.

"I found a lodging in Purgitz," she said, "and food; but there has been great suffering among your men."

Her attire was the same as when he had seen her last--barbaric and splendid, dark furs, scarlet powdered with gold, turquoise velvet and crimson satin; her face was pinched and sallow, but her eyes were

clear and expressive under the thick long lashes.

"I wish we had no women with us," said the Marquis faintly.

She dismounted before he had divined her intentions, and drew a silver flask from her sash, and held it out to him in her white fur gloved hands.

"Only a little poor wine," she murmured humbly, and she had the cup ready and the red wine poured out.

He thanked her gravely and drank with distaste; their heavy gloves touched as he handed the horn goblet back to her and again their eyes met.

In the pale, clear winter morning he looked dishevelled, pallid, and sad, but his eyes were steady, and held the same look as had lightened them in the chapel of St. Wenceslas.

"If there are no more storms, we shall do very well," he remarked quietly. "I think there are no more than twenty leagues to Eger, and M. de Saxe took this route last year with but little loss."

"Not in this weather," returned the Countess Carola. "And M. de Belleisle is not Maurice de Saxe."

Both her remarks were true, but the Marquis would not confirm them; he bowed gravely, as if displeased, and passed down the rocky path.

She remained beside the silver fir looking after him. The cold clouds had closed over the feeble sun and the wind blew more icy; all the sounds of a moving camp came with a sharp clearness through the pure, glacial air.

The Marquis made his way up the ascent to where his regiment bivouacked. His progress was slow; the sky became darker and lower as he ascended, and his way was marked by the frozen dead and the unconscious dying. He turned a point of rock to see the figure of Georges d'Espagnac standing at the edge of a little precipice fanning some glimmering sticks into a flame. Then the snow began; suddenly a few flakes, then a dense storm that blended heaven and earth in one whirl of white and cold.

VI. ON THE HEIGHTS

The snow fell without a break for three days; on the morning of the fourth it ceased a little, and by the time M. de Belleisle had reached Chiesch stopped.

The army had now been a week on the road, and the Marèchal hoped by a forced march to reach Eger, on the borders of Bavaria, with those who remained of the thirty thousand men who had marched out of Prague.

The famous *régiment du roi*, reduced to half their number, had fallen out of the vanguard, and stumbled along as best they might through the rocky ravines and high mounting roads. There was no longer any order in the army; the retreat had been one horror of death; men fell every moment, and were quickly buried in the silent snow; the wretched refugees died by the hundred. The waste of life was appalling; M. de Vauvenargues felt sick and delirious from the constant spectacle of this helpless agony; men dropped to right and left of him, he passed them at every step on the route; two of his fellow-officers had died the same night; it was like a shrieking nightmare to the Marquis to have to leave them, carrion in the snow; and now the strength of young Georges d'Espagnac began to fail; both had long ago lost their horses; M. de Biron himself was walking;

there was indeed scarcely an animal left in the army; gun carriages and wagons had been abandoned all along the route as the mules died.

As the sombre evening obscured the awful sights along the line of march, the thing that the Marquis had been dreading for the last two days happened: Georges d'Espagnac lurched and fell insensible by his side. M. de Biron looked over his shoulder.

"Poor child," he murmured; then, to the Marquis, "It is death to stop; you can do no good. Come on."

But M. de Vauvenargues shook his head and drew the wasted young figure out of the ghastly march.

A wagon with a broken wheel rested close by with two dead mules still in the traces and the corpse of a fair-haired woman flung across them, just as she had crawled out of the way. The Marquis wondered vaguely why they should have dragged this wagon so far; the covering at the back was open, and the heavy canvas flaps rose and fell sluggishly in the bitter wind, while from the interior had fallen a silver dessert service that glittered curiously on the thick snow and some rolls of straw-coloured silk that the Marquis had once seen hanging on the walls of M. de Belleisle's room in the Hradcany castle.

He winced at the bitter irony of it; yet the rolls of silk, when shaken out, were some covering for the young Lieutenant, and the wagon was some protection from the wind.

Beyond this he could do nothing; he knelt and took d'Espagnac's head on his knee for greater warmth, and waited.

It was little over a week since he had looked at the beautiful inspired

face turned upwards in the chapel of St. Wenceslas; he gazed down now at the poor head on his lap, and the tears rose under his lids.

Georges d'Espagnac was wasted till his blue uniform, tarnished and torn, hung on him loosely; his face was so thin that even the hollows in the temples showed clearly and of a bluish tinge, while the lips were strained and distorted; all powder and dressing had left his hair, which hung in a mass of damp locks of a startling brightness about his shoulders; his right cheek was bruised by the fall from the saddle when his horse died, and his gloveless right hand was cracked and bleeding.

The Marquis felt his heart, and it was beating reluctantly and wearily.

There was no hope, he knew; at any moment the snow might begin again, and this lovely life must go out as the other lives were going out, unnoticed, unsweetened by any care, regret, or tenderness.

But it never occurred to M. de Vauvenargues to leave him, though he knew that his own best, perhaps his only, chance of life lay in movement, in pressing on.

The darkness fell slowly and with a certain dreadful heaviness; the added ugliness of the distant bark of wolves completed the speechless horror of the Marquis's mood.

Still the army was trailing past him, bent figures supporting each other, a few Generals still on horseback, a few wounded and women in sledges or carts.

From an officer of the Black Musqueteers he begged a little wine that brought a tinge of colour into d'Espagnac's cheeks and proved how pitifully easy it would have been to save him by warmth and care.

"There is only rough nursing here, Monsieur," said the musqueteer

kindly; "leave him and save your own life, for I think the snow will begin again."

"Monsieur," replied the Marquis gently, "he is so very young. And maybe he will be conscious before he dies, and find himself alone and hear the wolves. And it is such a little thing I do."

And still the army went past like a procession in a dream of hell, and every moment it became darker, until the fir trees and the rocks were being lost in blackness and the howls of the wolves sounded nearer. Presently came a woman walking with more energy than most, yet stumbling under some burden that she held in her arms. At that moment d'Espagnac suddenly recovered consciousness, and cried in a clear voice--

"Let us get on our way, my dear Marquis--we ought to be at Eger tomorrow night."

The words made the woman pause and look round. The Marquis gazed at her; he had last seen her on a white horse beneath a silver fir; and though he had forgotten her since, he had now a passionate desire that she should stop and speak to him.

As if in answer to this wish, she crossed directly to the wagon. The young Count had fallen into a weak swoon again, and she looked down on him calmly.

"Your friend is dying," she said. "My God, how many more!"

She sat down on a round grey stone and put her hand to her head; then the Marquis saw that she carried, wrapped to her breast, a small sick child.

"You must go on," he said, with energy. "You must not stop for us,

Mademoiselle."

"I cannot walk any more," she answered. "I am very strong, but I cannot walk farther."

"Where is your brother?" he asked.

"Dead," she replied.

"Dead!"

"The word seems to mean nothing. I have a child here, dying too. I thought it might be happier dying in some one's arms."

It was exactly his own thought about Georges; he smiled with his courteous, sad sweetness, and putting the lieutenant's head gently on one of the still rolled-up curtains, rose.

"We are on the heights, are we not?" asked Carola "I seem to have been climbing all day."

He approached her. "I think we are very high up," he said gently. "Will you give me the child, Mademoiselle?"

She resigned the pitiful burden without a word; the Marquis shuddered as he felt the frail weight in his arms.

"So cold," he murmured. "How could they bring children on such a march as this! How far have you carried him?" he added.

"Since morning," answered Carola; "and it is a girl, Monsieur."

The Marquis looked down into the tiny crumpled white face in the folds of the fur mantle, and laid the little creature down beside d'Espagnac.

"What can we do?" asked the Countess, in a broken voice.

"Nothing," he answered gravely; "but if you have any strength at all, you should join the march. It is your only chance, Mademoiselle."

She shook her delicate head. "Please permit me to stay with you. We might help each other. This is very terrible--the wolves are the worst." She set her lips, and her pinched face had a look of decided strength. "Will the army be passing all night?" she added.

"I do not think so--surely there cannot be many more."

"I was thinking when they go--perhaps the wolves--"

She paused.

He was unused to these severe latitudes; there were wolves in France, but they had never troubled him.

"They might attack us," she finished, seeing he did not comprehend.

He took his pistols from his belt and laid them on the ground beside him.

"I am armed," he answered.

The Countess rose stiffly; her thick fur-lined cloak fell apart and showed the bright colours of her dress beneath, the tags and braids of gold, the vermilion sash and ruffled laces. "It is strange that I should live and my brother die, is it not?" she said wearily. "He fell from his horse and struck his head on a broken gun. Then he died very quickly." There was dried blood on her fur gloves and on the bosom of her shirt. She went to the unconscious child and knelt beside her, moved the wrappings from the pallid, dead-coloured

face, and touched the cheek. "I think she will never wake again--but your friend?" She glanced at the Marquis, who was standing looking down at M. d'Espagnac.

"I can only watch him die," he said.

The Countess drew from her bosom the flask she had offered to M. de Vauvenargues four days before.

"This was filled this morning," she explained, "and I cannot take it for it makes me giddy." She moved to the side of M. d'Espagnac and raised his head tenderly and forced the spirits between his teeth.

"I think there is a lantern in the wagon," said the Marquis, and went to find it. The dark was now so thick that they could scarcely see each other's features, but he found the lantern and flint and tinder and lit it, and the long yellow beams were some comfort in the overwhelming sadness of the night.

The effect of the brandy on M. d'Espagnac was sudden and almost terrible: he sat up amid the tumbled rolls of silk, and his cheeks were red with fever and his eyes open in a forced fashion. He appeared clear-headed and master of his senses; his glance rested on the Polish lady and then on the Marquis. "You should not have waited for me," he muttered. "On--on to Eger. I shall soon be well." He raised his wasted, bleeding hands to his brilliant hair. "I am sick from seeing people die," he said. "It could never have been meant. O God, what have we done?" He crossed himself.

"This is war, Georges," answered the Marquis. "Remember the chapel of St. Wenceslas and the words we spoke there."

M. d'Espagnac shuddered and fell back on to the cloaks the Marquis had piled under his head. Carola took his poor torn hand.

"Rest a little longer," she said, "and then we can continue on our way."

Save for a few stragglers, the army had passed now, The isolation seemed to increase with the dark, and the greedy howls of the wolves came nearer.

The lieutenant struggled up again and cried impetuously, "I am not going to die! That would be folly, for I have done nothing yet."

"No, you shall not die," answered Carola, and grasped his hand tighter. The Marquis was on the other side of him. Georges d'Espagnac laughed.

"You must not wait for me, Monsieur." Then he closed his eyes, and shiver after shiver shook his limbs.

The baby stirred and wailed dismally; in a moment Carola had it caught up and pressed to her heart. The sick man whispered and moaned, then suddenly sat up in violent delirium.

"I will not see any more die!" he cried. "No more, do you hear? These people might have *done* something--what were they born for? How much farther? No food--no rest. How much farther? How far to Provence?"

The Marquis started; he was himself Provencal, and had not known M. d'Espagnac came from his country; the word stirred agony in the heart he controlled with such difficulty.

"Provence!" repeated the lieutenant. "They will want news of me, you know, Monsieur. I must tell them--the quest of glory--"

Again the words stabbed M. de Vauvenargues. "Georges," he

murmured, bending over him, "perhaps you have attained the quest."

M. d'Espagnac laughed again.

"What a jest if I should die!" he muttered wildly. "My heart is quite cold, it is freezing my blood. Perhaps I am in my grave, and this is some one else speaking. How far to Eger?--how long to the Judgment Day?"

"I am with you, Georges d'Espagnac," said the Marquis. "We are alive."

He seemed to hear that.

"Where?" he demanded.

"On the heights," said M. de Vauvenargues.

It was now quite dark save for the light of the wagon lamp that fell over the straw-coloured silk hangings of M. de Belleisle, the beautiful anguished face framed in the gorgeous hair, the woman in her barbaric splendour clasping the feeble child, and the slender figure of the Marquis in his blue and silver uniform; it glimmered, too, on the pieces of the Marèchal's dessert service, and the sparkle of them caught Carola's eye.

"Do you travel with such things?" she asked. "Our nobles sleep on the ground, and drink from horn--"

"M. de Belleisle must travel as a Marèchal de France," answered the Marquis. "But these things seem foolish now."

A great giddy sickness was on him, and a distaste of life that could be so wretched; the spirit within him was weary of the miserable flesh that suffered so pitifully.

"Give me my sword," said M. d'Espagnac. "I am starting out on a quest. Do you hear? Jesu, have mercy upon me!"

Carola rose and walked up and down with the child. "You are Catholic?" she asked.

"No," answered the Marquis.

"An atheist?" she questioned.

"An ugly word, Mademoiselle "--he gave a little sigh; "but yes--perhaps."

"I am sorry for you," said Carola; at which he smiled. "But your friend?" she added. "We have no priest!" She seemed distressed at the thought.

"His soul does not need shriving," replied M. de Vauvenargues.

But the words seemed to have penetrated the lieutenant's clouded consciousness; he clamoured for a priest, for the last Sacrament, for the Eucharist.

The Marquis caught him in his arms and held him strongly.

"None of that matters," he said with power. "You are free of all that--upon the heights."

The voice calmed M. d'Espagnac; he rested his head on his captain's breast, and shuddered into silence.

The Marquis looked up to see Carola with empty arms. "Where is the child?" he asked.

"Dead," she answered, in a tired voice. "And I have laid her under the wagon with my crucifix. I think she was a Hussite, but perhaps God will forgive her, for she was too young to know error."

"Do you suppose God's charity less than yours, Mademoiselle?" answered M. de Vauvenargues gently. "You sheltered a heretic child all day--will not God shelter her through all eternity?"

She looked at him strangely.

"I feel very weary," she said; "the wolves sound nearer."

The Marquis thought of the two dead mules and the woman's corpse that Carola had not seen; he was stretching out his hand for his pistol when d'Espagnac lifted his head.

"Thank you, Monsieur," he said, and his voice was sweet and sane; "I fear I incommode you and Mademoiselle." He smiled and raised himself on one arm. "You must not stay for me. I am very well. Dying, I know--but very well."

Carola came closer to him.

"I know the prayers of my church--shall I say them for you?"

He faintly shook his head.

"Thank you for your thought. But we are so far from churches."

He was silent again, and the Marquis noticed with a shudder that the great snowflakes were beginning to fall once more.

"How can we endure it?" murmured Carola, and the tears clung to her stiff lids.

M. d'Espagnac moved again. "There are some letters in my pockets--if you should return to France--"

"Yes, yes," said the Marquis.

The lieutenant gave a little cough, and seemed to suddenly fall asleep; they wrapped him up as well as they could and chafed his brow and hands.

The snow increased and drifted round the wagon and began to cover them softly.

Presently, as there was no further sound, the Marquis held a scrap of the feather trimming of his hat before d'Espagnac's lips and slipped his hand inside the fine cold shirt.

They discovered that he was dead; had evidently drawn his last breath on the word "France," and resigned his soul without a sigh or struggle.

It was horrible and incredible to the Marquis in those first minutes; why should he, never robust, and a girl of delicate make survive, and Georges d'Espagnac, so young, strong, and full of vitality, die as easily as the ailing child?

He bent low over the sunken face, and the loose strands of his hair touched the frozen snow.

"The Quest of Glory," said Carola, in a strange voice. The Marquis looked up at her, and his eyes were full of light.

"Yes, Mademoiselle," he said simply, and drew the heavy cloak over the face of Georges d'Espagnac.

"A joyful quest!" she cried, in a hollow voice. "Yes," he said again, "a

joyful quest."

He rose, and the snow drifted on to his argent epaulettes, his torn lace cravat and his loose hanging hair. He leant against the wagon and put his hand to his side; now that they had the covered form of the dead between them, the hideous loneliness became a hundredfold intensified. Heavy tears forced themselves with difficulty from under Carola's lids and ran down her wan cheeks, but she made no sound of sobbing.

"You are a brave woman," said the Marquis very gently. "You must not die. Give me your hand."

She shook her head.

"Leave me here. Why should you trouble? Go on your way."

She bent her head and then felt his hand on her shoulder, drawing her, very tenderly, to her feet; she resisted her giddiness, which nearly flung her into his arms, and murmured in a firmer voice--

"Very well. We are companions in misfortune and will stay together." She crossed herself and whispered some prayer over the dead. "It is horrible to leave them," she added, thinking of the wolves.

"He is not there," answered the Marquis, "but ahead of us on the way already."

He unfastened the lantern from the wagon and, taking it in his left hand, offered the right to the Countess.

An extraordinary sweetness had sprung up between them; they felt a great tenderness for each other, a great respect.

As they made the first steps on the terrible, difficult route, with the

snow-filled blackness before them and their poor light showing only death and horror, the Marquis said to his companion--

"If I could have spared you, Mademoiselle, any of this--"

She broke in upon his speech--

"We shall never forget each other all our lives, Monsieur."

Then in silence they followed in the blood-stained track of the army towards Eger.

VII. THE HOME AT AIX

The winter of the year 1742 had been the coldest, in every part of Europe, that had been known since 1709, and the following spring was also remarkable--for heat and sunshine and rainless days and nights.

By early April the chestnuts outside the residence of the Clapiers family in Aix were in perfect bloom and the white, golden-hearted flowers sprang from the wide bronze-green leaves and expanded to the summer-like sun; beneath the trees was a deep rich-coloured shade that lay up the double steps of the house and across the high door with its fine moulding of handsome wood. The shutters were closed against the heat; the whole street was empty of everything save the perfume of the lilac, roses, and syringa growing in the gardens of the mansions.

This languid peace of afternoon was broken by the arrival of a gentleman on horseback followed by a servant; he drew rein under the chestnut trees, dismounted, gave his horse to the man, and rather slowly ascended the pleasant shaded steps. Without knocking he opened the door and stepped at once into the dark, cool hall. A

clock struck three, and he waited till the chimes had ceased, then opened a door on his left and entered a large low room full of shadow that looked out on to a great garden and a young beech covered with red-gold leaves in which the sun blazed splendidly.

Luc de Clapiers stood gazing at the home he had not seen for nine years. Nothing was altered. On just such a day as this he had left it; but he remembered that the beech tree had been smaller then and not so prodigal of glorious foliage.

There were the same dark walls, the same heavy mahogany furniture, the same picture of "The Sacrifice of Isaac" opposite the window, the same carved sideboard bearing silver and glass, the candlesticks and snuffers, the brass lamp and the taper-holders. Above the mantelpiece were, deep carved, the de Clapiers arms, still brightly coloured, fasces of argent and silver and the chief or--and on the mantelpiece the same dark marble clock.

Luc crossed to the window that was not far above the ground and looked down the garden; in the distance were two gentlemen--one young and one old--followed by three bright dogs.

Luc put his hand to his eyes, then unlatched the window, that opened casement fashion. The sound, slight as it was, carried in the absolute stillness; the two gentlemen who were approaching the house glanced up.

They beheld, framed in the darkness of the room, the slim figure of a young soldier in a blue and silver uniform, wearing a light grey travelling cloak.

"Luc!" cried the younger, and the other gave a great start.

Luc stepped from the window and crossed to his father. He went

simply on his knees before him and kissed his hands, while the old Marquis murmured, "You never wrote to me! You never wrote to me!"

"No," added the younger brother reproachfully, "you never wrote to us, Luc."

Luc admitted that he had not, beyond the first letter that told of his return from Bohemia.

"I did not know if I should be able to come to Aix," he said, "forgive me, Monseigneur."

"You have got leave now, my child?" cried the old Marquis, grasping his shoulder.

"Yes, my father, I have some leisure now," he answered rather sadly.

"Come into the house," said his brother, who was much moved. "I can hardly believe it is you--you have changed a great deal in nine years."

They entered the house--the Marquise was abroad; the servants were roused. Luc heard the orders for the preparation of his chamber and the stabling of his horse with a thrill of pure pleasure; it seemed that he had been very long away from home.

His father made him sit by his right at the long black table that was now covered with wine glasses and dishes of fruit, and kept his eyes fixed on him with an earnest look of affection.

"You are very pale and thin," he said.

The brother touched the young soldier's hand lovingly. "Have you been ill, Luc?" he asked.

Luc blushed; he was conscious of his frail appearance, of his occasional cough, of his languid movements.

"Yes, I was ill at Eger," he admitted reluctantly, "after the retreat from Prague."

The other two men were silent. By that retreat M. de Belleisle's name had become accursed through France: in ten days he had lost nearly twenty-two thousand men. The scandal and horror of it had brought M. de Fleury to patch a hasty peace with Austria.

"And do you recall," added Luc sadly, "Hippolyte de Seytres, Marquis de Caumont, whom I wrote of to you very often? He was my 'sous lieutenant.' I heard last week that he had died in Prague just before the garrison capitulated in January."

"I am sorry for de Caumont!" exclaimed the old Marquis, thinking of the father.

"He was only eighteen," said Luc, "and a sweet nature. M. d'Espagnac, also, who came from Provence, died in my arms. I became delirious with death."

"It was very terrible?" questioned his father gravely.

"Ah, it was of all campaigns the most disastrous, the most unfortunate. Let me not recall those black nights and days--those marches with hunger and cold beside us, the disorder, the misery--the poor remnant of a glorious army that at last reached the frontier of France--leaving our blood and bones thick on the fields of Germany." His eyes and voice flashed and a clear colour dyed his cheek. "Belleisle is punished," he added. "His pride is cast down, his war ended in failure. But is he humiliated enough for all the lives he so wantonly flung away?"

"They say Cardinal Fleury cannot sleep at night because of it," remarked the old Marquis, "that he always sees snow and blood about him. But you have returned to us, my son."

Luc gave him a long, soft, mournful look, then glanced at his brother Joseph.

"Yes, I lived," he said thoughtfully; "but I have not come home gloriously."

"There is time ahead of you," answered his father proudly. "I know that promotion is slow. But M. de Biron told me he had no fault to find with you."

Luc sat silent. He was gazing intently at the fine figure and noble face of the old man in his murrey-coloured velvet and delicate lawn cravat, powdered peruke, and long embroidered satin waistcoat, his firm right hand with the white cornelian signet ring that rested on the table. His delicate features and steady eyes, his pose and movements were all instinct with tradition, nobility of race, and nobility of nature. He belonged to the pure stock of the provincial aristocracy that had never waited at any court or been favoured by any king, but who had been "grand seigneur" at the time of the Crusades.

The younger brother was like him and like Luc: sweetness and dignity mingled in his features. He was dressed richly, but far from extravagantly, and in a fashion some years old.

His handsome brown hair hung in natural curls round his face, unconfined by any ribbon. His expression was at once more simple and less ardent than that of the young captain, at whom he gazed with affection, respect, and admiration.

Luc looked from one to the other of these two fair faces, both so

serene and loving in expression, and the paleness of his countenance increased, a lustre as of tears came into his eyes. He put his hand on to his father's and clasped it so firmly that the signet ring was pressed into his palm.

"No, not now," he said--"not now."

"What not now?" smiled the old Marquis.

"That is all I have to say, Monseigneur," replied Luc, with a sudden air of weariness. "Tell me what has happened in Provence."

He turned his eyes on Joseph, who blushed and declared humbly that the news of Aix was not worth offering to one who had seen Paris and foreign countries.

"But heretics are spreading ever among us," put in the older M. de Vauvenargues. "And we very often hear the pernicious name of Voltaire."

The captain's hazel eyes dropped; he held his father's hand even more firmly.

"If there is a man who should be burnt in the marketplace it is M. de Voltaire," continued the old Marquis. "He and his books and his doctrines burnt--together."

Luc removed his hand and rose; he asked if his mother would not soon return, then raised his hitherto untouched glass of amber white wine and drank it slowly. Joseph had a delicate feeling that his brother would like to be alone with their father.

"I will see if your chamber is set," he excused himself, and left them quietly.

The Marquis was following him, but Luc set down his glass sharply and said, "Father!"

The old man turned. He thought that this was the explanation of the "not now" of Luc. He closed the door and returned to the table.

Luc stood with his head a little bent on his bosom, the sun, that filtered through the beech leaves without, setting his silver broderies aquiver with light and sparkling in the loosened threads of his brown locks.

"My poor boy,"--his father took him gently by the shoulders--"you are ill."

Luc raised steady and beautifully smiling eyes. "No, Monseigneur, not ill." He paused a moment, then added, "But not strong--not strong enough for a soldier."

The Marquis did not comprehend. Luc laid his hands on his father's breast and a look of faintness came over his face, but his eyes glowed more ardent and brilliant than ever.

"I must leave the army, father. I must send in my resignation to-night. Bohemia broke my health. France--France has no further need of me."

"Luc!"

The old man stepped back and stood rigid, as if the words were so many arrows to pinion him.

The young soldier took hold of the back of the dark mahogany chair in which he had been sitting.

"Monseigneur," he said with great sweetness, "I am a

disappointment to you that must be hard to bear...I have been nine years in the army and am no more than captain. I must now leave this honourable employment with ruined health and a ruined fortune."

The Marquis stood without movement. Luc proceeded to tell him, gently and with courage, of the great expenses of the war, of his illness at Eger, of the necessity he had been under of parting with most of his property in Paris to meet his debts, of the doctor's advice that the bitter hardship of the retreat from Prague had sown the seeds of perpetual weakness and suffering in his breast.

"But I shall live many years," he finished, "and there are other ways of glory."

With these simple words was the tale told of his life's hopes, his dearest dreams utterly vanquished by brutal circumstance. Even his father did not know what ambitions he had warmed in his heart only a few months ago; even his father did not know from what horrors of despair he had won his lofty sweetness of acceptance.

"You must not grieve, Monseigneur--soldiers expect such fates, and I--" Then quite suddenly his voice failed him, and he turned away his head, almost violently, and gazed at the placid gardens and the gorgeous beech tree.

The Marquis's chin sank on his bosom; he also had had his secret dreams that he was now called upon to relinquish. This was his favourite son standing before him and saying he was a useless invalid. "A useless invalid"--the words surged up in the old noble's throat till he felt as if he had spoken them.

"Forgive me," he muttered; "I was not expecting this--no, not expecting this." He raised his head and said in a firmer voice, "M. de Caumont would be glad to be speaking to his son on any terms. I

must not be ungrateful--no, I must not be ungrateful."

Luc turned towards his father eyes that seemed to have widened and darkened. "I have thought of that," he replied. "I once indeed wished to die as Hippolyte and M. d'Espagnac, but I felt--" He paused again; a certain diffidence that had always made him reserved and a true modesty prevented him from uttering his deep conviction of gifts--nay, genius--that must yet find expression and recognition.

No such thought consoled the old Marquis. He saw his son's career broken at the beginning and his son's fortune lost. He was not himself a wealthy man; he could do little more than give him a home--and it was an inglorious end.

But the noble rallied.

"Your mother will be glad," he said, with a pathetic smile. "I think she has not had an easy moment since you went to the war."

Luc could not answer. He saw that his father was looking not at him, but at the famous uniform of the *régiment du roi* that he wore, and, like a picture suddenly thrust before his eyes, came the long-forgotten recollection of the day his father had bought him his commission and of their mutual pride in the trappings and symbols of war: there had been a de Clapiers in the army for many hundred years. Thinking of this, and seeing the old man's wistful glance, Luc felt the bitterness that had smitten him on his sick couch at Eger re-arise in his heart.

"My God!" he cried softly, "it is hard to be a useless man."

He kissed his father's hand, and then went up softly to that chamber he had left nine years ago in a tumult of glorious anticipation, of surging ambitions, of pure resolutions. The anticipations had been

disappointed, the ambitions had ended, but the resolutions had been kept. Luc de Clapiers had done nothing since he had left his boyhood's home of which any man could be ashamed.

He thought of his mother as he entered the room, for she had promised to leave it untouched for him, and he saw at once how lovingly she had kept her word. Certainly, the red and gold hangings on the bed and the windows had been removed, but carefully preserved, for the servants had already brought them out and laid them across the cabinet by the window--the beautiful curved bow-window with the latticed panes bearing the little coat of arms in each in leaded, coloured glass.

There were his chairs, his books, his candlesticks, his low, wide bed with the four carved posts, his crucifix, his picture of St. Cecilia with her music from the Italian, even his violin and his old torn papers in a green portfolio. He went round the room, vaguely touching these objects that were free even from a speck of dust.

Only one thing was missing--a wooden figure of St. George that had stood on a bracket in the corner. Luc had been fervently religious in his youth and passionately devoted to this image that he had even wished to take to the army with him. His mother, he remembered, had never liked this figure, which she had declared uncouth and hideous. Now, it seemed, she had taken her revenge, for the bracket was empty.

Luc went to the window, where the chestnut leaves were peering against the pane. The green of them, with the sun behind, was translucent as jade, and the workmanship of the white curling flowers seemed a beauty beyond bearing.

As Luc looked at them he took off his sword, his sash, his scarf, his coat, and laid them across the old wand-bottomed chair in the

window-seat.

Then he crossed to the square tortoiseshell-framed mirror that hung by the bed and looked at himself in the murky, greenish glass.

No longer a soldier...he had taken off his uniform for the last time. He stood the same as when he had last left this chamber, save that it was then all before him, now all behind. He gazed at his own face, white above the white shirt, still noble and pleasing, still young, but frail and wasted and sad.

Instinctively he turned, as he had done in his childish troubles, to the corner where St. George had stood. The loss struck him afresh as he, for a second time, beheld an empty bracket, and was symbolic also, for he had travelled far from the help of Christianity since he used to pray to St. George; yet the vacant place smote him. He turned at the opening of the door; a woman came towards him speechlessly, her lips moving and her eyes full of a kind of trembling light.

He sprang to meet her and clasped her strongly; she thrust into his arms what seemed a lump of wood.

"Safe, dear, safe. Did you think I had destroyed it?" she managed to say.

He kissed her cheek and then her hands. She began crying with pleasure. "St. George, Luc," she murmured. "I have kept him very carefully."

The young soldier looked at the idol of his childhood; his emotions reached the unbearable agony caused by dim recollections the hand of tenderness beckons from the past. He laid St. George on the bed.

"Oh, my mother!" he cried, in a sinking voice. He fell on his knees.

hid his face, and wept.

VIII. CLEMENCE DE SEGUY

August had scorched the chestnut leaves and September withered them into golden scrolls, and still Luc de Clapiers remained idle, but with a burning heart, in the quiet home at Aix.

On a certain afternoon, when he was alone in his chamber writing, the need for action, the thirst for fame blazed up through his sweet, vain resignation beyond his power to restrain. The glory that he had set himself to achieve had always been the glory of arms, and the realization that this path was for ever closed to him came upon him again suddenly as if he had but just been told that he no longer belonged to the *régiment du roi*. He laid down his pen: he had been writing an Elegy on the young de Caumont, for whom he had often, during the war, written discourses on glory, and as he praised the young soldier he had praised also d'Espagnac--the two, so young, so beautiful, so brave, so pure, became one in his mind, and with them there mingled the vision of another. He felt that he was lamenting a third--his own youth, his own hopes that had been buried in the snows of Bohemia. He had written of Hippolyte de Seytres, "He was born ardent," and it was true of himself. During these months of idleness the fire of this ardour had increased in his heart until it was unbearable. He sat quite still, with his hands clasped before him, gazing at the thinning chestnut leaves and the blue sky behind them that was spreading in all directions through a pile of loose clouds. His serene face flushed with resolution. In that moment he felt a scorn of himself that he had ever permitted poverty and ill-health to hinder him in his designs on fortune. He was of a noble birth that brought obligations, of gifts that brought obligations also; he was young, laborious, serious, passionately desirous of serving his country; and he was French, born at this most glorious period of

liberty of thought, splendour of achievement in every sphere. He must, he could do something.

Of Paris and the great world there he knew only what he had heard and read--the outside of it, glittering, young and hopeful, a court led by a king whom France adored and Luc pictured as one like himself--ardent, avid of glory, and with every opportunity to his hand--and another court, no less powerful, of intellect and genius, led by M. de Voltaire, a name that blazed in Europe. Luc had received a scant education, and his long military preoccupation had given him small leisure for study. He could scarcely spell out Latin, and he had not read many books; but those he knew,--Corneille, Racine, Moliere, Pascal, La Fontaine, Boileau--he both loved and absorbed. They were as so many torches to light his way.

M. de Voltaire himself he had always regarded with deep respect and admiration. The daring atheist, the brilliant son of the people, the caressed of kings and flattered of women, the greatest man of letters of the age, the most decried and abused of human beings had no more fervent disciple than the quiet young aristocrat who had watched his splendour from afar. Luc thought of him now, and the tumult in his heart rose higher.

"Shall I give up everything my soul urges me to because I had to leave the army?" he murmured. "Must I live and die in Aix?"

But what was open to him? There was only one career worth comparing with the military--that of diplomacy. He had studied law and history; he felt capable of serving France by his pen as well as by his sword. This thought of politics had come to him before; to-day it came and would not be dismissed.

He rose impulsively and went to the shelf where his books stood; he picked them up, one after another, and laid them down without

opening any of them.

An unnameable excitement had possession of him; an inner ecstasy made his limbs tremble. He felt that the whole world was too confined for his spirit; he felt that he grasped a sudden certainty that he would and must attain glory.

He returned to his table, composing himself by a strong effort of will, and wrote to M. de Biron, his former Colonel, asking his help in his design of entering the diplomatic service.

When this was written and sealed his old calmness returned. He left his room, gave the letter to a servant, and went into the garden.

The sky was one flushing dome of golden blue, glowing in the west with the first hues of sunset. The leaves of the trees, the grasses, the flowers, and herbs were all quivering in a low, warm breeze. The old Marquis was seated on a stone bench by the carp pond, with his dogs beside him; he was watching the water, stained a turquoise blue from the sky and across which the blunt-faced carp floated, sparkling in their scarlet, orange, and black scales.

Luc came up to the basin. His father smiled at him, but did not speak. The young man was silent also; he was thinking, by some whimsical connexion of ideas, of Carola Koklinska in her gay trappings as he looked at the vivid fish.

He thought of her quiet ways, of her splendid clothes, of her great strength. He, not she, had fallen ill after their ghastly march to Eger. On his recovery he had been told that she had gone on with the army to Paris.

She left a letter for him, in which she begged him to see her if he could in Paris. She gave her sister's name, which meant nothing to

Luc, but was well known in the capital, and said she was always to be found at that lady's hotel.

Luc had never written to her. She had become a curiously faint memory, blotted with darkness and snow and horror, yet gleaming vividly in her scarlet and gold through the Bohemian night.

The Marquis spoke and broke his thoughts. "You are very silent, Luc."

The young man looked up instantly from the water. "Monseigneur," he said, "I have resolved to enter politics."

His father flushed with surprise and pride. "I did not think you would be long idle, Luc," he answered affectionately; "but you have set yourself a difficult career," he added simply. "I have, as you know, no influence at Court."

"I have written to M. de Biron; he will give me introductions at least. When I hear from him I will go to Paris."

He spoke quietly, but in his eyes was a leaping light.

The old Marquis, both touched and pleased, rose and fondly laid his hand on his shoulder.

"You are a true de Clapiers," he said, then sighed a little, thinking of the blue and silver uniform lying folded away in the chest in his son's room.

Luc divined the thought, the regret.

"I shall still serve France, Monseigneur," he said.

"But I have no interest in Paris," repeated the old noble half sadly,

"and I believe no one can succeed at Court without powerful friends. And we--we are rather remote from the great world, here at Aix."

Luc was not daunted by these words. Paris was to him a dream city ruled by a dream king; there was nothing concrete in all the pictures he formed of it. He knew he had ardour and talent and devotion to offer, and he did not believe that these things were ever refused.

"If M. de Biron can give me no help I shall write to M. Amelot," he said quietly, naming the Minister for Foreign Affairs--"or to His Majesty himself."

For a nature that was reserved, almost timid, in all personal matters this was an extraordinary resolution, and one that would not have occurred to many men. The Marquis noted it with some amaze, but made no comment. In these few months since Luc's return from Bohemia his father had learnt to recognize and respect something remarkable and unfathomable in the character of his son.

The sunlight was fading with a sad rapidity. Luc left the garden to return to the house; he entered the dining-room by the open windows. A soft shadow was over everything, making the objects in the chamber almost indistinguishable, but on the table showed the white square of a letter. He picked it up and took it to the light of the pale length of the window; it was heavily sealed with an elaborate and foreign coat of arms and addressed to--

"MONSEIGNEUR, MONSEIGNEUR LE CAPITAINE LE MARQUIS DE VAUVENARGUES."

He opened it with inevitable curiosity, for the hand was unknown to him; but as he broke the thick wax a strong Oriental perfume told him the writer. It was from the Countess Koklinska. She wrote briefly and with an air of serene friendliness, as might be used by one writing

from the Court to the country. She hoped that the Marquis was recovered from his fatigues, and hoped she might see him in Paris. She had heard that he had left the army, and asked abruptly on the last line of her letter, "What is the next step in your career?"

At first Luc flushed as if she had said something insolent to his face, then his blood stirred in answer to the challenge, and he was, if anything, pleased by this reminder from one who, more than either his father, his mother, or Joseph, understood his temper and his ambitions. She had some right to ask; there was the true spirit of heroism in her. She had been as a flame amid the horrors of the retreat from Prague--a flame to light and warm--and had shown him that a woman could tread the heights, as he conceived them. He recalled, with a great tenderness, her poor, starved face bending over the sad death-bed of Georges d'Espagnac, and he was grateful to her for the last line, which showed that she also remembered.

And she hoped to see him in Paris. Paris! The word flashed with untold possibilities; it dazzled with the name of King Louis and M. de Voltaire. Luc was spurred by the desire to mount this moment and ride to Paris, where the world's thought, the world's energy, the world's intellect were stored.

He crushed the letter into his pocket and began pacing up and down the dark, old-fashioned room, where his father and Joseph would be content to eat every meal until they died, but which to him was fast becoming a prison, compared to which the steppes of Bohemia were preferable and seemed, indeed, enviable liberty.

Here he could not mention the name of the arch heretic and infidel, Voltaire; here he must still go to the church and listen to a service that he felt outworn; here the new philosophy, the great dawn of new ideas, new glories were unknown; and the soul of Luc was turning to these things as the sunflower to the sun. He did not move when the

candles were brought in and placed on the mantelpiece and sideboard in exactly the position in which they had stood for the last century, but remained by the window looking out on to the evening.

The golden beech was veiled by the dusk; the gaudy autumn flowers were unseen; the shapes of bushes and trees stood dark against a translucent sky; a strong scent of herbs came and faded on the sweet air.

In that moment Luc felt that life was endless, glorious, and triumphant to those who had in their hearts this gift of energy, this spur to achievement. He bowed his head in a kind of tumult of thanksgiving, and such an agitation of joy filled his bosom that he had to support himself against the tall window frame. The sound of the opening door sounded, to his ecstatic mood, sharp as a pistol crack; yet in reality the door was both opened and closed softly. Beyond the candlelight stood a girl in a much-frilled rose-coloured muslin gown, holding in her hand a bunch of drooping wild pinks.

She wore a chip straw hat tied under the chin with gold ribbons and a white lace shawl over her shoulders.

When she saw Luc she laughed prettily and advanced to the table; her extreme fairness seemed the greater by contrast with the shining dark mahogany.

"Of course you do not recall me," she said, in a delicate and pleasing voice. "I am Clémence de Sèguy, who saw you leave to join your regiment nine years ago--when she was in the convent school."

Luc made an effort to place and remember her; his instinctive courtesy helped him, though his thoughts had been strangely scattered by her sudden appearance.

"I remember no one like you, Mademoiselle," he said, "in all Provence; but your name is known to me as that of one of my father's friends."

She laughed as if pleased.

"Tell me about the war," she answered.

As he looked at her he seemed to see the powerful face, slender figure, and gorgeous garments of the Countess Carols standing beside her in absolute contrast. The two could not have been more different; the reality before Luc's eyes was not so strong as the inner vision. He put his hand to the fragrant letter in his pocket.

The Marquis entered and presented him with pretty ceremony. As Luc kissed the girl's fingers he thought of another hand that he would soon salute in Paris--Paris.

IX. THE HERETIC

The answer from M. de Biron contained flat discouragement. In his words seemed to lurk a smile at the simplicity of Luc: there were no places at Court or even in obscure corners of France that were not already allotted, long before they were vacant, to those who were friends of pensioners of the Court favourites and the Ministers.

It was absurd to hope that anyone with no recommendation above his talents could obtain even a clerk's place in the Government, added M. de Biron, and he advised Luc to spare himself the fatigue and humiliation of further applications, and suggested that he should abandon ideas that were certain to end in disappointment.

The letter was meant kindly, but it brought a flush of anger to Luc's cheek; then he laughed, and with the laugh his old serenity returned.

M. de Biron should not block his way; there were other channels. He did not show the letter to his father, but merely told him that his former Colonel could be no help.

The Marquis said nothing, but a few days later produced, with much pride, a letter from M. de Caumont to M. de Richelieu, Governor of Languedoc, asking for his interest for Luc, who was touched and moved by his father's thought.

Yet he was not altogether pleased. He had heard enough of M. de Richelieu from Hippolyte, M. de Caumont's son, who had never spoken of him with anything but dislike, and he knew the Governor's reputation as the most famous man of fashion of the moment and a hard persecutor of the Protestants in Languedoc.

But he could refuse neither his own father's interest nor the help of his dead friend's father, and M. de Richelieu was a great gentleman who could raise anyone where he would. It happened also that he was now at Avignon, where he seldom enough made his residence, and Luc's direct enthusiasm resolved him to go there and present his letter himself. His father was for sending it by messenger, and his mother wished to detain him in Aix. He suspected her of tender little schemes with regard to himself and Mademoiselle de Sèguy, who had, with such innocent coquetry, been sent in upon him that August evening, when, as it happened, he had first made the resolve to enter politics. He overruled this gentle opposition and left Aix in late September with one servant and a good roan horse. Though his soul was serious it was young. The freedom of the peaceful open country, the freshness of the autumn air, the sight of the fields of grain—these simple things affected his spirits to the height of exaltation. He felt his old health return; he was as light-hearted as if he had never seen Bohemia.

But as they rode farther into Languedoc the surroundings changed:

the ground was neglected, the cottages mere huts, the peasantry silent and ragged, the cattle poor and scarce. Luc, noticing this, fell into a kind of gravity.

They took the journey easily. On the second day, when within easy distance of Avignon, they stopped at a humble inn on the high road shaded by a dusty grove of poplar trees.

Luc found two other travellers in the parlour. At the first glance he was interested in them; he had a passion for studying character, and could never observe strangers indifferently. He crossed to the window, which looked on to a herb garden, and seated himself on the chintz-covered window-seat and delicately watched the two, who were engaged in eating omelette and salad at a round table near the fire-place. One was a priest and a conspicuously handsome man, but without attraction, for his dark face was hard and immobile and his eyes, though very brilliant, expressionless; he wore the black robes of a canon, which hung gracefully on his spare, powerful figure.

His companion was, as Luc knew at once, a foreigner; what else he might be was not so easy to decide. His age might be between thirty and forty. He was tall, well-made, and well-featured, with a rich olive complexion and quickly moving brown eyes. He wore his own hair hanging about his face, and there was more than a little of the eccentric in his dress, which was of the brightest green silk lined with black.

From the hard quality of his French, something vivid, self-confident, gay, and yet indifferent in his manner and person, Luc believed he was Italian.

He, on his part, was not long in noticing the slim young gentleman in the window-seat, and, leaning back in his chair, he called out an invitation to wine. Something in his cordial tone, his attitude, his

smile of gleaming, excellent teeth showed Luc that he was a fellow of no breeding.

Without hesitation he civilly declined and left the room. As he closed the door he heard the foreigner laugh good-naturedly and say something to the priest in Italian marked by a beautiful Roman accent.

Luc had his own meal outside on one of the little tables under the dusty vines, and before the middle of the afternoon rode on again, meaning to reach Avignon before the night.

Towards evening they came to a miserable village, whose inhabitants seemed in a considerable state of excitement: a great number of women were talking and shrieking round the fountain in the market-place, and three priests argued outside the porch of the poor little church.

The Marquis acknowledged their humble salutes, and was glad to be rid of them and out in the open country again.

He had not long cleared the houses, however, before he overtook a procession, which was evidently the cause of the commotion. It consisted of four soldiers, a serjeant, and a prisoner, followed by a crowd of peasants, mostly men and boys.

Luc's hazel eyes flashed quickly to the prisoner, who walked between the two foremost soldiers. She was a young peasant girl, finely made and not more than eighteen years of age. Her blue skirt and red bodice were worn, faded, and patched, her feet and arms bare; round her coarse, sun-dried hair was a soiled white handkerchief. Her face, though pale under the tincture of the weather, was composed and serene, even though the crowd was assailing her with hideous names, with horrible accusations, with handfuls of

dirt and stones.

Her hands were tied behind her, and if her walk fell slowly the soldiers urged her on with the points of their bayonets.

The Marquis reined up his horse to allow them to pass. He supposed they were going to set her in the stocks for witchcraft or scolding; that look on her face he supposed must be stupidity. The whole spectacle roused in him sad distaste.

The rabble of peasantry, seeing that he was a gentleman, fell to silence till they were well past him, then broke out again into shouts and curses. The soldiers turned off the high road across a field that led to a long slope and a little thin wood.

The Marquis remained still, with his patient servant behind him, watching the little procession.

He noticed the girl stumble and saw one of the soldiers thrust at her so that she fell on to her knees. The crowd at once broke into laughter and pelted her with dirt.

Luc touched up his horse, crossed the field, and in a moment was among them. One of the guard had dragged the prisoner to her feet; she was being assailed by such horrid terms of abuse that he thought she must be some shameless thief or murderess. He spoke to the serjeant with quiet disgust, and his fine appearance, lofty manner, and long habit of command served to win the man's respectful answer: he could not, he declared, keep the people off. As he spoke he threatened with his sword the nearest of the crowd, which had already scattered at the sight of the gentleman.

"The law," said Luc, "is no matter for me to interfere with," for he saw the fellow pulling a warrant from his pocket; "but I will use my whip on

these should they further molest yonder wretch."

He glanced at the prisoner, who stood for the moment isolated with her head bent. Her feet and the edge of her dress were covered with mud; her shoulders were bruised and her legs scratched and bleeding; her face, which was handsome, but of low type, was flooded with sudden colour and her wide lips twitched uncontrollably. The Marquis sickened to see her; he was turning back when she looked up straight into his face. Her eyes were large, far apart, and bloodshot, the lashes white with dust. As she gazed at Luc her disfigured, almost stupid-looking countenance was changed by a smile which was like a lady's thanks for courtesy.

Then she bent her head again and began to walk on painfully. The soldiers closed round her, the serjeant fell in with a salute to the Marquis, and the crowd followed, but at some distance and in silence.

Luc watched them till they were over the hill and out of sight; he frowned in absorption and hardly troubled to notice two horsemen who had joined him and reined their horses near his. When he turned, indifferently, to look at them, he saw that they were the same remarkable couple that he had noticed at the inn.

The Italian saluted him instantly.

"Monsieur," he said with some eagerness, "where has the woman gone?"

"Over the hill," answered Luc shortly.

The Italian rubbed his hands together softly.

"Well, well," he said under his breath.

"What has the creature done?" asked the Marquis of the priest. "And where have they brought her from?"

The priest named a village some leagues off, and the Italian remarked that they had seen the procession earlier in the day, and that the probable object of bringing her this distance was to terrorize the countryside.

"What is her crime?" demanded the Marquis haughtily. He disliked priests and foreigners in general and felt no reason to make an exception for these two.

The priest fixed on him eyes that were metallic and twinkling in their hardness; he made the sign of the cross and said, in a cultured, toneless voice--

"The cursed woman was a heretic."

The Italian seemed amused.

"M. de Richelieu is working hard to purify Languedoc," he remarked.

"What was her punishment?" asked Luc.

"An easy one," returned the priest--"she will be hanged."

Luc turned his head towards the speaker.

"Because she is a heretic?" he asked slowly.

"What else?"

The angry blood stained the Marquis's delicate face. He knew these things happened, but he had never before been brought close to them.

"You make me feel ashamed of my humanity," he said. "Are you a Protestant?" demanded the priest.

"No."

"Perhaps you do not believe in the Gospels?" urged the other maliciously.

Luc gazed at him with a kindling scorn.

"Neither in Gospels, nor Christ, nor God," he said sternly, "nor any of the symbols superstition uses--nor in anything you and your kind worship."

The priest was taken aback for a moment and did not answer, but the Italian remarked cheerfully--

"A follower of M. de Voltaire."

"A follower of no man," returned Luc wearily. Some minutes passed while the three horsemen seemed to be waiting silently. Then Luc moved his horse away in the direction of the high road; he had seen the soldiers, without their prisoner, and the straggling crowd coming back over the crest of the hill.

The Italian cried after him--

"Are you for Avignon to-night, Monsieur?"

He answered without looking back. When he reached the main road again the dark clouds that had been lowering all day broke and a steady rain began to fall, hastening the short autumn twilight. After perhaps half a league the road branched. The Marquis turned to the left, but soon perceived that he had missed his way, for the dark was descending, and there was no sign of the walls of Avignon on all the

wide, gloomy horizon.

The rain was steady, cold, and seemed not likely to cease. The only building in sight was a deserted farmhouse with the roof half gone and weeds and fallen masonry choking garden and yard.

Some of the lower rooms were, however, dry and sheltered, and in one of them Luc, his servant, and the two horses took refuge for the night.

X. THE MAGICIAN

The Marquis, roused by his servant, woke to see the man standing in misty moonlight by the square of window; with a languid distaste at being called from sleep Luc rose.

"Monsieur," said the servant in a low voice, "there are those two, the foreigner and the priest, and a third with them just gone into the barn."

He pointed to a building close to the house, from the large doorway of which came a great blaze of light, strong and fitful, as if caused by a bonfire.

The reflection of it trembled over the rough floor of the room, and it was this that had aroused the servant to look from the window, when he had, he declared, seen three men carrying lanterns cross the yard and enter the barn; he swore to two being the Italian and the priest.

Luc considered; his curiosity was certainly roused and a sense of distrust also. The barn was so lonely, the two strangers so peculiar in appearance--and he recalled how the Italian had called after him, "Are you going to Avignon to-night?" as if he wished to be sure that he would be out of their way.

"What can it be?" he murmured to himself, and he thought of coining.

The light from the barn was increasing in intensity as he watched it, and presently began to take on an artificial red tinge that lit up windows and door with a lurid glow.

"I think they practise fireworks," smiled Luc. He put on his hat, took up his sword, and quietly stepped out into the dreary farm-yard, followed by his servant.

The first objects that he beheld were three horses fastened to the stump of an elder tree: two, those ridden by the travellers he had met yesterday; the third, a black horse of great beauty. Keeping in the shadows of the house, and avoiding the long trails of flickering light, Luc and the servant gained the barn and crouched against the wall of it, endeavouring to find some aperture. Voices raised loudly and angrily came from within, among them the tones of the Italian speaking in his own language with great vehemence.

At length Luc found a considerable hole in the loose and rotting beams that composed the walls of the barn and, looking through, saw an extraordinary scene.

In the centre of the building stood an iron brazier, which held a large fire of vivid leaping flame; round this was drawn a chalk circle marked with various figures and symbols, and beyond that a ring of dead frogs and snakes.

Behind the brazier stood the Italian attired in a sweeping black robe and a scarlet skullcap; he held in one hand a long white wand and in the other a closed parchment-covered book.

Beside him stood the priest regarding him with an expression of impatience and vexation. The exceeding brightness of the flames

threw over the features of both a glow of red, and gave even their dark garments something of the colour of blood.

A third man was facing these two. He was standing quite close to Luc; he had his hands behind his back, and wore a long tabinet riding-cloak; his slight figure, scarcely of the medium height, was of a remarkable grace; his hair was clubbed and unpowdered. Luc could only see his profile, which was sensitive, attractive, and high bred.

This last man was manifestly a noble, which caused Luc some surprise. He was gazing at him with curiosity when the priest suddenly moved and disclosed a fourth occupant of the barn. Luc gave a long shudder of horror and moved back from the hole.

It was the dead body of the heretic peasant woman, sitting upright in a rude chair with the rope still round her swollen throat and the harsh flare over her disfigured face, dropping jaw, and staring eyes.

"What is it, Monseigneur?" asked the servant eagerly.

"Have your pistols ready," answered Luc in a stern whisper, "and get to some vantage where you can see what is going on within."

The man obeyed, creeping away through the mingled moonlight and firelight until he found another notch in the wood of the wall.

Luc again looked into the barn. The priest had now thrown on some powder that filled the whole building with smoke, the Italian was shouting short sentences in an uncouth language, and the third man had sprung forward and was staring at the corpse through the soft film of the bluish smoke.

"She does not speak!" he cried. "She does not speak!"

The priest gave a furious exclamation and cast something dark and

heavy into the flames, and the Italian tore a chain from his neck and flung it in the lap of the dead woman. A towering red and orange flame, that seemed as if it would set the roof on fire, suddenly shot up from the brazier, an unearthly and awful voice called out--

"Beware of she who comes from Bohemia!"

This was cut short by a passionate ejaculation; who it came from Luc could not tell. All three men seemed to run together; the brazier was overturned, and there was perfect darkness, broken by a shriek, a groan, several short cries of fury, and the rip of unsheathing swords. Luc ran round to the doorless opening that was the main entrance to the barn; as he reached it a man came rushing out with a weapon in his hand, bare in the moonlight. Luc seized him and flung the sword away. The servant had come up now and stood ready with his pistol.

"Explain yourself," demanded the Marquis.

The other, completely taken by surprise, wrenched himself free, but made no attempt to escape.

"Are you the Devil?" he asked, with more eagerness than fear.

"No," answered Luc in brief disgust.

Before he could say more the priest came out of the barn carrying a lantern.

"What is this foul mummer?" asked Luc sternly. "I shall speak to the Governor."

Seeing his companion in the power of a stranger, the priest gave a cry and made as if he would fly into the night.

But the other turned on him fiercely.

"By God, you are wanted here!" he cried, and the priest came back instantly.

"This is a creditable affair for one of your cloth to be involved in," said Luc.

The priest ignored the comment, but his companion remarked with a great degree of haughtiness--

"I suppose I have been disarmed by a gentleman?"

"Oh yes," answered Luc quietly. "Take up your sword."

The stranger turned and looked for it by the aid of the priest's lantern.

"Where is the Italian?" asked Luc.

"Escaped," returned the other carelessly, slipping his weapon into the scabbard.

"The rascal ran out by the back way," added the priest.

"He hath left his horse," remarked Luc, glancing at the three beasts.

"Being far too frightened to think of it," was the answer, and the stranger, with a sudden show of pleasantness, came up to the Marquis and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"Come, my dear fellow," he said, "do not look so grave. We have been endeavouring to raise the Devil and have made a failure of it, that is all."

"A stale game," said Luc scornfully. "And you were profaning the dead, Monsieur."

"A peasant! A heretic!" cried the other, with an instant return of haughtiness. "And who are you to call me to account?" At this the priest touched him on the arm, and he added in a quiet tone, "You are scarcely a spy, Monsieur."

"No," said Luc wearily. His anger had changed into mere disgust. "No--you know you were doing an illegal thing, a foolish thing, and a horrible thing; but I am no judge of your actions. I will forget you, Monsieur. Only I ask you to give that poor creature decent burial."

He was turning away when the other caught him by the sleeve.

"Who are you?" he asked curiously. "I should like to know you. You speak like M. de Voltaire."

Luc had instantly resolved not to give his name.

"I am a private citizen of Provence," he answered, "and I have business in Avignon. The rain is over and I have had some rest, also I do not care to remain here, so I will now ride on to the town."

He made a grave bow and was turning away when the other again detained him.

"You cannot ride to Avignon till it is light. Come with me--my name is Armand, Monsieur Armand--I do not ask yours."

"And I have not yours," answered Luc.

The other laughed.

"Armand for to-night--and I swear it is my christened name. There is supper in the house--I give you an invitation."

The priest seemed impatient to be gone and annoyed at this

conversation, but Luc, despite his distaste of the whole thing, was interested in the stranger, in his very shamelessness, in his peculiar, gentle address, in his mention of M. de Voltaire. He felt curious to see this man's person, for they stood now in the shadow of the barn, and the priest kept his lantern turned carefully away.

"Monsieur," answered Luc, "at present I should not know you again; if we go into the house I shall see your face."

"I trust you," answered M. Armand. He beckoned to the priest, and the three entered the farm and the room next to that where the Marquis had slept, and where his horse still stood. Luc found that it was in good repair and rudely furnished, as if frequently used.

A deal table occupied the middle, and when the lantern was set on this it showed several chairs, a cupboard, a plain couch with a coverlet, and a stout box or chest with brass locks. M. Armand ordered the priest to light candles; they were taken from the cupboard and placed on the table in iron holders. The room was now in bright light, and Luc and the stranger instantly looked at each other with calm curiosity.

The Marquis beheld a man still young, but not so young as he had at first believed, dressed in a dark grey riding-suit without ornament or jewel, wearing high boots and a plain sword with a basket shell.

His face, which was singularly attractive, was rather broad for its length and very finely shaped; it expressed wit, energy, and a great deal of humour. His eyes were dark brown, large, and powerful. His hair grew low on his brow, and was of a dull auburn, lacking in brightness and colour, but of great length and thickness.

Luc, quick at reading men, could not read this one; he only knew that there were great possibilities in that face, and that the whole

personality was not one to be ignored. His wonder at the hideous ceremony in the barn increased.

The priest, with a heavy air of annoyance and displeasure, was unpacking a basket of provisions which stood on the table; Luc remembered seeing it behind his saddle the previous day.

There were a round of beef, a couple of loaves, a small cheese, and a large pie in an earthenware dish, besides three bottles of wine. M. Armand produced knives, forks, and plates from the cupboard, and invited Luc to join them; his air was one of careless good-nature.

But the Marquis could not eat; he ignored the priest, and addressed himself to M. Armand, who had seated himself on the corner of the table and was taking his supper with good appetite.

"You spoke of M. de Voltaire," he said. "Do you know him?"

"Oh, every one in Paris knows him."

"But you know him?" insisted Luc.

"Yes."

"And yet you, by the aid of a Christian priest, seek to raise the Devil!" exclaimed the Marquis.

"I wanted to know something. The Devil should have entered into the heretic and answered my questions; but the fellow cheated. Faugh! Do not let us speak of it." Luc fixed his eyes on the handsome, pleasant face. "What did you want to know?" he asked, with a smile.

"Something about a woman." Monsieur Armand cut himself a slice of pie. "I had that rascal fetched from Venice on purpose. The whim cost me something."

"I truly marvel at your folly," said Luc calmly.

"Oh, there is a Devil," returned the other, with a sideway glance, "and one might raise him, you know. But you have the fashionable tone of Paris."

"I have never been there save for a day in passing," answered Luc simply. "And I speak from conviction, not fashion."

The priest, who had touched neither food nor wine, suddenly addressed Luc.

"Where is your servant, Monsieur?"

"In the next room--where should he be?" Luc turned from him coldly. "And now I will be on my way."

He rose, and the priest made an instantaneous movement to guard the door.

"Take some supper," said M. Armand. "And do not be in such a hurry."

Luc glanced from one to the other.

"I will go on my way," he said sternly. "Do you seek to detain me?"

M. Armand was eating his pie leisurely; he looked at the priest reflectively.

"You should have thought of the servant before," he remarked.

"I have promised not to speak, and I can answer for my servant," answered Luc, guessing his thoughts.

"Do you think I am afraid?" asked the other, languidly raising his bent brows. "We are not very likely to meet again," he added.

"No," assented the Marquis. "You interest me, though. I think your priest here would like to kill me. I wish you joy of your holy companion."

"If I had my way, you would not leave here alive," said the priest, in a low, calm voice. "You are an atheist and a blasphemer, and a menace to Holy Church."

"And to your safety, Father," smiled M. Armand. "But go, Monsieur. You are a noble."

Luc bowed.

"I will see the heretic is buried," added M. Armand, "though she would not speak. Adieu. I am sorry you would not have any supper."

"Adieu," returned Luc gravely. The priest moved from the door, and he stepped out; the last glimpse he had of M. Armand was the picture of him seated on the table finishing his pie.

On reaching the yard he found the priest had followed him, and was standing a few paces off watching his movements. He called his servant, and the man came round the corner of the farm leading the two horses.

"Where have you been this while?" demanded the priest.

The fellow answered respectfully that he had been making the animals ready.

Luc mounted and was turning out of the yard when the priest came to his stirrup.

"Swear to me on the Gospels, on the Cross, that you will be silent about what you have seen to-night," he said, in a low voice.

"You heard my word," answered Luc coldly. "And I have told you I believe in neither Cross nor Gospels. Stand away--your habit smells rank to me."

The priest stepped softly back; the servant mounted, and the two rode away.

They had gone perhaps half a league before the Marquis recollected that he still did not know the road to Avignon; in his haste to be rid of his companions he had never thought of this.

Instantly checking his horse, he looked back at his servant.

The dawn was breaking, and the man's face appeared of a strange pallor.

"We do not know the way," said Luc.

"Any way, Monseigneur," answered the servant, "as long as we do not go back."

"What is the matter?" asked Luc sharply, for the fellow was plainly in a fright.

"Monseigneur, I did not mean to tell you. I thought we should both be murdered."

"I thought that possible too," replied the Marquis calmly. "Anything else?"

"Oh, Monseigneur--there *was* murder. I went back to the barn to fetch

my hat. I had the little lantern--and I could not forbear looking in; and there was the foreigner lying dead from a sword-thrust."

XI. M. DE RICHELIEU

Luc felt instantly that his servant spoke the truth, and saw instantly how he had been deceived. There was no back door to the barn; the young man, discovering he was being cheated, had run the poor foreigner through and left him there to die. The priest knew it, and hence his anxiety about the servant: he had dreaded the very thing that had occurred--namely, that the fellow should return to the barn and see the second corpse.

The Marquis's first feeling was one of intense anger that a dissolute young noble had been able so to fool him; he had accepted the tale of the Italian's escape like any child, and had sat down to bandy words with one who was fresh from a miserable, cowardly murder.

"Why did you not tell me before?" he asked.

"Monseigneur, I thought you might wish to return, and then we stood a good chance of being murdered."

"Why?" demanded Luc sharply. "We were two to two, and one of them a priest."

"But, Monseigneur, he was armed under his habit, and I saw evil intention in his face--and how could we tell how many more were in hiding? With respect, Monsieur le Marquis, they were dealing with the Devil."

"Are you sure that the man was dead?" asked Luc.

"Monseigneur, perfectly sure. He lay in a strange attitude with one

leg drawn up, and I crept into the barn and felt him, and he was cold with a hole in his chest and his fingers all cut where he had snatched at the sword--and with the dead frogs and snakes and that other corpse in the chair--"

The Marquis cut him short.

"You will be silent about this, Jean, until I give you leave to speak. I shall not go back--now, at least."

Jean, only too thankful that his master was not returning to what he feared might be an outpost of hell, promised readily enough. They proceeded along the straight road, looking out for some habitation where they could ask their way.

Luc felt depressed, angry, and disgusted. He recalled the Italian's healthy face, his callous laughter, then the hideous little scene in the barn with the horrid, foolish details of gross superstitions; lastly, the calm serenity and haughtiness of the young man whose careless manner had so deceived him; and the priest, in his mockery of a habit--Luc wondered that he had not made some attempt at a disguise. Evidently all of them had been pretty sure that they were not likely to be interrupted; yet Monsieur Armand, as he called himself, had not seemed very concerned, or even surprised, at being discovered.

Luc, riding along in the grey dawn, wearily followed out the consequences of this wretched episode.

They would burn or bury the body of the foreigner, who was not likely to be missed; they would probably burn the whole barn--who was to make inquiries?

M. de Richelieu did not keep such a strict policing of Languedoc that

it was likely to come to his knowledge--well, the affair would be hushed up; and he, Luc, saw no good in soiling his lips by any mention of it, though he felt himself no longer bound by the promise he had made the young rake.

The Italian charlatan had perhaps not lived so as to look for a better end--let the whole thing be forgotten; Luc only hoped that he might meet neither priest nor patron again.

As the sun rose above the horizon they came upon some poor scattered farms where a peasant driving pigs put them on the road to Avignon, which town they reached about noon of a misty autumn day. Luc put up at a quiet inn, and, having ascertained that the Governor was in residence but would soon be leaving for Paris, he sent his servant at once with the introduction from the Marquis de Caumont and a letter from himself requesting an interview.

Jean dispatched on this business, the Marquis shifted his linen, breakfasted, and sat at the inn window overlooking the unfamiliar main street of beautiful Avignon.

His head ached, his limbs were full of lassitude, and the incident of the night hung unpleasantly before his mental vision. He tried to replace this picture with others: with that of Clémence de Sèguy in her frilled rose-coloured muslin; with that of young d'Espagnac kneeling in the chapel of St. Wenceslas. As he drove his thoughts back to the Hradcany, he suddenly recalled that the voice last night which the Italian had feigned to issue from the poor heretic's dead lips had said, "Beware of her who comes from Bohemia!" It was a coincidence curious and distasteful that the wretched magician's last words should have been these; doubtless they referred to some intrigue of his patron, but to Luc they recalled the Countess Carola, and he did not care to think of her in any such connexion.

Her dark, gorgeous image, resolute among the snows, against the sombre, pure background of silver firs and frozen skies, came before him suddenly. He felt swiftly heartened as he pondered upon her; she was a vision of mingled fire and ice that passed the allurements of the senses and exquisitely attracted the spirit.

Luc shook off the depression of yesterday's sordid adventure, and his dreams all rushed back to his heart. His modest confidence that something would come of his interview with the Governor occupied him anew; he even allowed himself to picture his father's pleasure at his return with news of success.

Early in the afternoon Jean reappeared with a courteous note from M. de Richelieu's secretary: His Highness was departing for Versailles to-morrow, but would M. le Marquis wait on him to-night at eight of the clock?

Luc sent the servant back with his answering thanks for the appointment, and went upstairs to unpack his finest suit; it was plain enough, and the work of a country tailor, but Luc attired himself gravely, with no thought for the fashion, and went out to find a barber to powder and dress his hair. When this was done, it was already dusk.

He could scarcely eat any dinner, and reluctantly admitted to himself that he was nervous. His natural reserve made him shrink from waiting on the great, and inherited pride made him shrink from asking a favour; neither had his long soldier's training fitted him for dealing with a courtier like M. de Richelieu.

He felt he would be at a disadvantage with such a man, and the old powerful longing for the army, for the career on which he had set his heart, and to which he had devoted his best energies and earliest youth, assailed him; but he angrily controlled this weakness, and

broke his thoughts by opening a little volume of Pascal he always carried in his pocket.

At the appointed time he rode up to the Governor's residence and gave his name. He was at once ushered into a great painted antechamber with a domed ceiling and white walls covered with a confusion of cupids, wreaths of flowers, tambourines, flutes, masks, and garlands all very elegantly drawn and coloured.

In each panel of the wall hung an oval mirror which had above it a gilt sconce of perfumed wax candles; the chairs were of delicate ash-wood and Aubusson tapestry. On a low green marble-topped table by one of the windows was a portfolio of prints and a book bound in calf; the name of the author caught Luc's eye--it was M. de Voltaire.

Luc was not insensible to the charm and elegance of the apartment; he was keenly sensitive to all beauty. The taste that he had never been able to cultivate was accurate; he knew that paintings, furniture, and every detail of the chamber were the most exquisite possible, and his spirit expanded in the atmosphere; he did not even notice that he was being kept waiting longer than was courteous.

Turning presently, thinking that he heard some one approach, Luc caught sight of himself nearly full length in one of the oval mirrors. He saw a slight, pale young man, with a serene and delicate face, thoughtful hazel eyes, and a clear complexion, precise grey curls, and a plain suit of violet cloth trimmed with silver, a rich lace cravat tied very carefully, a simple sword, and a black ribbon round his throat.

The strange surroundings made his own person appear strange; he looked at himself as he might have looked at a mere acquaintance, critically, yet almost disinterestedly.

He was still searching his own face when the folding-doors at the end of the room opened, and a black page wearing a scarlet tunic and turban silently motioned him to advance.

The Marquis followed him into the next room, and the beauty of the little apartment was such as he had never seen; it steeped his soul in sudden pleasurable languor. The page disappeared, and Luc looked about him eagerly.

The walls were of pale ash-wood, smooth and watered like satin; the carpet was of the same hue, but scattered with a design of dull pink roses; the chairs were gilt and violet velvet; and the window was hung with curtains of pale mauve and pink heavily fringed with gold, and looped so as to show the ivory satin lining. One entire side of the wall was covered by an exquisite piece of tapestry in a hundred melting hues, showing the legend of Europa and the Bull; on the pale carved wood mantelpiece stood a clock and candlesticks of rock crystal and enamel, and a fine china bowl of lilacs, camellias, tuberoses, and white syringa.

The whole was faintly lit by a silver and crystal lamp that hung by slender chains from the ceiling, which was covered by drawn grey silk.

A cabinet of beautiful workmanship inlaid with painted china plaques, a desk of marquetry and ormolu covered with rich articles, and an exquisite lute of ivory and ebony tied with jade green ribbons completed the furniture.

In one corner a white, violet, and gold brocade curtain was half drawn away from a low couch that stood in an alcove; as Luc glanced at this he saw with a start that a man was lying there, asleep or dozing, with his head turned towards the wall.

He wore a soft blue satin dressing-gown and a cravat of flimsy lace that hung in a cloud to the ground; his hair, which was curling and unpowdered, flowed over his bosom and shoulders; his breeches, waistcoat, and stockings were white; his feet thrust into gold slippers.

His whole figure was considerably in shadow, but by his even breathing he was certainly asleep.

Luc was first amused and then vexed; he made no doubt that this was the Governor.

"M. de Richelieu," he said, in a firm voice. "Your Highness--"

The sleeper stirred lightly, raised his head, and sat up. Luc was looking at the "Monsieur Armand" of last night's sordid happenings.

XII. THE DIAMOND RING

Despite the different light, surroundings, and dress, the recognition was instantaneous on each side. For a breathless instant the two men gazed at each other. M. de Richelieu was the first to speak.

"So you are M. de Vauvenargues!" he said, and put his gold-slipped feet to the ground and threw his head back with a cold haughtiness.

"I am M. de Vauvenargues," answered Luc.

"You were introduced unceremoniously" returned the Duke. "I did not expect you so soon. Be seated, Monsieur le Marquis."

Luc took one of the delicate chairs and fixed his eyes on the pale carpet; he was conscious of a wretched feeling of disappointment, of

disgust, of a sense of personal failure.

"You look rather pale, Monsieur," remarked the Governor, in those same gentle tones that Luc had heard last night. "I trust you have had an easy journey from Aix?"

The Marquis bowed in silence.

M. de Richelieu supported himself on his elbow on the pile of cushions at the head of his couch.

"You bring the best of introductions," he said. "M. de Caumont speaks of you warmly--you were Hippolyte's friend, and with him in Prague, were you not?"

Luc was impressed, almost bewildered, by his composure, his quick assumption of the courtly, gracious manner. Last night this calm had surprised him; now he found it astounding. M. de Richelieu had not changed colour, and was regarding him with unfaltering eyes.

But it was not in Luc to take up the matter on these terms; he revolted against the situation, against the part he was evidently expected to play. The slim, gorgeous young Governor, the sumptuous little room became hateful to him. He rose.

"Monseigneur," he said coldly, "I came here on a misunderstanding."

M. de Richelieu interrupted.

"You came, I think, Monsieur, because you are desirous of entering Government service--M. de Caumont asks my influence on your behalf."

"I will not put you to that trouble, Highness," answered Luc wearily.

The Duke laughed in his princely way, as if he was too great to be easily offended; yet Luc thought he was vexed too, perhaps a little confused.

"I shall be able to give you a position, Monsieur, immediately."

Luc flushed almost as painfully as if some one had offered him money.

"You mistake me," he said gravely.

"No, I think I estimate you fairly well," answered the Governor decidedly.

"In this you mistake me," replied Luc, with a sudden flash in his voice. "There is nothing in your gift, Monseigneur, that I would accept."

A look of wrathful amaze glimmered for an instant in the Duke's brown eyes, but he smiled, though coldly.

"For one who hopes to succeed in diplomacy," he said, "you are singularly simple."

"Not so simple, Monseigneur, that I do not see the attempt of your Highness to bribe a man who holds an unpleasant secret."

M. de Richelieu did not alter the regal ease of his attitude, but he suddenly changed his tone.

"Forgive me, my dear Marquis," he said pleasantly, "but we evidently do fail to understand each other, and that is a pity--"

Luc interrupted.

"Highness, this is the truth. I know that the wretched Italian was murdered last night, and I know whose sword struck him down. You deceived me easily," he added simply, "and I know you are a great man, who can amuse himself as he pleases--you have the law in your own hands. But there is no employ under the Governor of Languedoc that I would take."

With the effort of saying these words the colour flooded his face; he did not speak them with any grandeur, but with a frowning distaste.

M. de Richelieu flashed into fierce haughtiness.

"Do you imagine that you will better yourself by taking this story to Versailles? You think you can ruin me, perhaps--"

"Monsieur!" cried Luc, raising his head.

M. de Richelieu was on his feet, a glittering, winning figure, difficult to associate with the miserable scene in the barn.

"Well, if you think, Monsieur," he said quietly, "that you would gain a hearing against me, remember I am Armand du Plessis," and Luc realized suddenly what a great man, what a notable person he was defying. He thought of his future career, and his heart sank; what could he hope to achieve commencing with such a powerful enemy?

Something of this thought showed in his sensitive face, and the Governor was quick to perceive and follow up his advantage.

"I have used *lettres de cachet* on less occasion," he said gently.

Luc turned so as to face him.

"Scarcely on men of my position, M. de Richelieu," he answered haughtily. "I am not of the bourgeois, to be threatened."

He was stung now out of his shyness and reserve; he faced the Governor as an equal and unabashed.

"As to last night, my own wish is to forget it," he said sternly. "I shall not speak for the sake of speaking--you know that. I should not be silent for any threat's sake if honour bade me speak--you know that also, Monseigneur."

M. de Richelieu was clearly puzzled; if at the same time vexed, or alarmed, he did not show it. His face expressed wonder and even amusement.

"It was only a jest last night," he said lightly, "a common amusement."

"It cost a man his life," answered Luc wearily. "But I pray your Highness not to speak of it."

"Well," returned the Duke, with utter callousness, "he was a knave, and deserved it. He was cheating, and I had him brought from Venice on purpose."

Luc did not answer; he felt tired, disappointed, and downcast. His one desire was to get away from this house and from Avignon.

"I can make yesterday's meeting fortunate for both of us," continued the Duke. "I liked you from the first. I require another secretary--"

"I must refuse," interrupted Luc. "I will take nothing, Monseigneur."

M. de Richelieu looked at him narrowly.

"Where have you lived all your life?" he asked abruptly. "In Aix and in camp," replied Luc. His dreamy eyes brightened. "I have been ten years with the army."

"Why did you leave?"

"Because my health broke," said Luc briefly. "There were not many of us, Monsieur, who survived the retreat from Prague."

"And now you wish to become a politician," said M. de Richelieu. "I suppose you are an idealist?"

Luc smiled to think of the utter hopelessness of endeavouring to express his aspirations to this man.

"I have ideas," he answered simply. "I think I could succeed in statecraft."

"Tell me some of your ideas--tell me something of what you would do were you in power."

The Duke was standing now in front of the many-coloured tapestry; his slight figure, his elegant features, and rich dressing-gown gave him an almost feminine appearance. A faint mockery curved his nostrils and touched his speech.

"I would not have men like M. de Richelieu Governor over any province of, France," answered Luc calmly.

Again that look of great haughtiness hardened the face of the Duke.

"You know nothing about M. de Richelieu," he said.

He seated himself on the slender-legged chair under the tapestry and began turning over a tray of engraved gems that stood on a little tulip-wood table; yet absently, and with his brown eyes on Luc.

The two men whose lives, characters, and experiences were so absolutely different that an impassable gulf existed between them

looked at each other as they might have gazed across the borders of some strange country that they would never penetrate. M. de Richelieu's career had blazed high above the heads of men for all to see, but it was unknown to Luc, who was ignorant of all the scandals and gossip of his time; and Luc, to the Governor, was a man who came from absolute obscurity, who was interestingly novel, but mainly to be noticed because he held an uncomfortable knowledge of an unfortunate incident the Duke wished forgotten. As he gazed at Luc, he was considering what to do. Though he had been involved in many affairs as doubtful and as dangerous as that of last night, though careless recklessness was the keynote of his character and he was confident in his great position and powerful name, yet a creditable witness to a murder connected with an unlawful ceremony to which his confessor was privy was not to be too lightly suffered to depart. The Duke had enemies; if they knew of this, they could make a story of it that the King would not dare disregard. From a spark like this might rise a flame that would burn the very foundations of his greatness.

Malice was not in his nature, and he felt no unkindness towards the cold young officer who so manifestly disliked him, but rather a curiosity to know more of him and a half-amused liking.

"Monsieur," he said at length, "this must be adjusted some way between us. You seem to refuse my advances. Perhaps you think I am setting some snare for you, but it is not so."

This had never entered Luc's thoughts. His outlook was so simple that the other could never have guessed it; he merely wished to get away, to forget it all, and try another road to success.

"Monseigneur," he answered wearily, because his head was aching, and the rosy light of the room and the scent of the flowers, that had at first so pleased, now oppressed his senses, "we have nothing to fear

or gain from each other. Permit me to take my leave."

With his stiff military bow he moved towards the door. M. de Richelieu stepped forward and, with an almost affectionate gesture, caught his arm.

"Be reasonable," he said. "I lost my temper last night; but after all the fellow was of no account--'tis over now."

"So I wish it to be, your Highness," replied Luc.

"But there is no need," continued the Duke, "that it should prevent me from doing you the service you came to request."

Luc was silent; he was not insensible to M. de Richelieu's beautiful grace, to the complete attraction of his person and features that his life, whatever it had been, had not in the least coarsened or spoilt. Such was the power of this charm, delicate, manly, strong, that Luc, though he despised the Duke without affectation, yet felt his scorn overwhelmed in this physical nearness.

"Secretary to the Governor of Languedoc is not a post easily obtained," insisted M. de Richelieu. "And I think we should work well together, Monsieur."

"It is not in your power to give me what I seek, Monsieur," replied Luc sadly. "Indeed it is impossible." The Duke drew back a step.

"I implore you allow me to depart," continued the Marquis. "We shall never understand each other."

M. de Richelieu twisted his fingers in the curls on his bosom.

"What object have you in keeping silence about last night?" he asked shortly.

"What object," returned Luc proudly, "have I in speaking?"

"Oh, you seem to have a great sympathy with heretics and charlatans and the baser sort. And what of your servant?"

"He did not see your Highness in the full light. Besides, he was a soldier, and is devoted to the house of de Clapiers; you may, Monseigneur, be assured he will not speak."

"That means that I have taken two obligations from you--my sword last night and your promise now," said the Duke very proudly. "It is impossible, Monsieur le Marquis, that you should refuse to take anything from me."

"I want nothing of your Highness," replied Luc; for he thought of the Duke's offers as so many bribes, nothing more.

M. de Richelieu was galled and angry; it was the first time in his life that he had felt himself obliged to anyone. He was an adept in bestowing favours, but had never before received one save from the King. His breeding, however, took the defeat gracefully.

"I hope," he said coldly, "that some day I may be able to balance this."

"There is nothing to balance," returned Luc earnestly, for the whole interview was irritating him. "Let your Highness forget it all and forget me."

"Will you go to Paris?" asked the Duke abruptly.

"Perhaps," said Luc. His plans were all dashed to the ground, and he had not yet formed others.

"Come to me, then, if you ever need help," said M. de Richelieu, with sudden and characteristic recklessness. "A Puritan like you is like to get into trouble some way."

"I am no Puritan," returned Luc, flushing slightly, "but an atheist."

M. de Richelieu crossed himself and, at the same time, laughed.

"Some day I must introduce you to Monsieur de Voltaire. As for me, I see I can do nothing with you. I wish you success, Monsieur, but I am not very hopeful."

He did not hold out his hand, but bowed very grandly and rang a little bell that stood near the tray of gems.

Luc returned the bow in silence, glad to take his departure; the black page appeared, and conducted him from the mansion. Luc passed through the beautiful apartments without any sense of pleasure now; he felt exhausted, and even faint. He longed to be out in the night and under the stars.

When he was on the threshold of the street door another page breathlessly overtook him.

"Monseigneur, you left your glove," he said.

Luc took the riding gauntlet, and felt something heavy in the palm. The colour throbbed in his face; he shook out on to his hand a diamond ring of exceptional beauty and remarkably set with sapphires.

"Yes, it is my glove," he said to the page, who was hurrying away, "but take this back to M. de Richelieu--it is a mistake." He held out the ring.

"Monseigneur said the jewel was yours," returned the page.

"Well, then," replied M. de Vauvenargues proudly, "take it as your guerdon for bringing me the glove."

He flung it on the carpet at the boy's feet and left the Governor's house.

XIII. THREE LETTERS

Luc was back at Aix in the peace, the confinement, the even atmosphere of his own home.

He told his father that M. de Richelieu had not been able to do anything for him, and the old Marquis advised him to give up all thoughts of any further career and settle down in Aix.

Luc listened patiently, but no advice could have shown less understanding of his character; even while he listened his heart was throbbing and his blood tingling with the desire of life, of liberty, of action, of glory. The very moment he had stepped across the threshold of his father's house he had felt the ordered, sluggish days fall round him like a chain; he saw the years stretch ahead in an uneventful avenue, with an undistinguished tomb at the end, and every nerve in his being cried out against it. His fruitless journey, the heavy disappointment caused by coming into actual contact with one of the men ruling France and finding him like M. de Richelieu, the persecution, the degradation, the misery he had witnessed in riding through Languedoc were but so many goads to urge him to a further attempt on fortune.

Paris blazed even brighter in his visions, and he thought long and often on the name of M. de Voltaire.

To please his parents, he still retained the forms of Christianity, and never hinted that he held that doctrine of free-thinking which his father so abhorred. But this reserve was another chain: he desired to be with those with whom he could exchange ideas, from whom he could gain wisdom, experience, and encouragement; not to have to be forever deferring to those opinions, habits, and traditions that he no longer shared nor admired.

Hence the very affection that surrounded him at Aix, and which he had often longed for when with the army, became first a useless thing to him, and then another burden, another chain to hamper and clog him.

As, gradually and day by day, his father's love made insidious demands on him, as almost imperceptibly he found his native sweetness giving way on many little points of difference, as he perceived affection laying hands on the most secret sensations of his soul, he began to revolt against this obligation of affection, of duty, of respect; he longed to stand, a free man, with his own life to make according to his own standards, unhindered by this fear of giving pain to those who loved him—the fear which had already made him deny his beliefs, and which now urged him to abandon his choicest hopes. His soul rose up against this exacting, tender love, that burdened him with responsibility; morally and mentally he stood alone, not desiring support, and strong to meet anything, yet through his heart and affections he was made captive to his father's chair and his mother's apron.

Autumn passed into winter. Joseph married and left home; this was another reason for Luc to remain. His mother clung to him with piteous fondness; his father deferred to him in matters of business, relied on him, treated him with courteous affection, dismissed all idea of his leaving them—had not M. de Biron and M. de Richelieu both declared politics hopeless?

Luc listened and waited; the chains became heavier every day. The Marquise was preparing another in the shape of Clémence de Sèguy, a good girl, beautiful and well-dowered. Luc, looking into her fair countenance, knew that she had never known an aspiration nor a sorrow in all her life; she bloomed in Aix like the late lilies he had seen in the garden the day of his return; pure flowers, modest with their own sweetness, they kept their heads bent towards the earth, and never lifted their petals towards heaven or the sun. Luc never looked at Clémence that he did not think of the Countess Carola; red like the trellis roses he pictured her, and, like them, for ever climbing and breathing perfume to the utmost clouds.

Yet these days were not wholly wasted; in the evenings, he would revive his forgotten knowledge of music, and play the clavichord to his mother's harp; and then his thoughts would fly wide, and drink at immortal wells of unquenchable longing, and see the ineffable hues of skies only to be glimpsed at by mortals.

Sometimes, when he was playing thus in the dark parlour, he would have flashing premonitions of immortality in which this life seemed a mere nothing that he could afford to waste; there was all eternity in which to join Hippolyte and Georges in the quest for glory.

In these moments he felt an unbounded ecstasy, and his playing would take on a richness and colour that transfigured the light music he interpreted; then a veil would be dropped over the vision, and there would come unbidden thoughts of the hopelessness of all high endeavour, the sad end, the open failure of all noble, unselfish lives, the uselessness of all great enthusiasms, all the gallant efforts of the pure minorities of the world, all the eager aspirations of reformers, preachers, prophets, swept away and forgotten in the commonplace corruptions, needs, vices, failings, and blindness of humanity. And these reflections were as a bitter blankness of soul to Luc, and the

comfortable room would darken round him like the jaw of hell itself.

But with equal conviction would come the afterthought that these broken lives, these lost causes, these ridiculed endeavours, these failures, these minorities had handed on the light from one century to another, and kept alive truth, courage, and all that is beautiful in the heart of man. Luc felt the intense force of the stirrings in his own bosom to be a response to these prophets, martyrs, lonely standard-bearers who were calling him to be one of them, to come forth from the sheltered happiness of common men and join the shadowy multitude who had climbed and perished and left a glimmering name behind. Life was little, yet tremendous; it was all a man had. Though its doings, its greatest events were so small, yet some could make marvels out of those few short years.

Millions did nothing with their lives, but all were not the same; the oak is large compared to the cherry tree, thought Luc, and some men can lift themselves. After the playing was over, and he was alone in his chamber, he would put some of his thoughts on paper for want of a better confidant—carefully concealing them, for his father considered it degradation for a gentleman to compose a line of verse or prose.

So the winter passed, and Luc remained in Aix doing homage to custom and family pride and family tradition and family affection. It happened that, at Christmas, a friend came from Paris and spent a few days with the de Clapiers; he was neither fashionable, nor of the Court, nor any admirer of M. de Voltaire and the new school of thought, but his speech unconsciously betrayed knowledge of a world that was alive with energy, change, and endeavour. Luc did not speak much with him, and never questioned him on any of those subjects on which he was burning to be enlightened; but when the visitor had left, Luc went to his chamber and wrote two letters, one to the King, one to M. Amelot, Minister for Foreign Affairs, both with the same request—that they would find him some employment for his

eager abilities.

It was an extraordinary act of courage on the part of a nature reserved, shy, and socially timid; no one who knew him would have credited him with it; but he made no confidant of any. When the two letters were written, sealed, and lying ready for dispatch, Luc, with a flush like fever in his cheek, took up the pen again and wrote a third--

To M. de Voltaire.

A thousand hopes and questions rose in his bosom, eager for expression; but modesty and pride together forbade that he should put anything intimate before a stranger. He made the subject of his letter his opinion of Corneille and Racine; he asked the judgment of the great arbitrator of letters as to the relative merits of the two geniuses; he expressed the criticism he had conceived on the rival masters, and begged to know if he was right or wrong. He gave the address of an inn he knew in Paris, and prayed that the answer might be sent there, if M. de Voltaire deigned to answer.

He sealed this letter with more agitation than he had felt when writing either to the King or to the Minister, and with all three in his pocket went downstairs to post them.

When he reached the hall, he hesitated a moment, then turned into the sombre withdrawing-room in the front. The candles had just been lit and the curtains drawn, for, though not late, it was a wet, dreary day.

Round the hearth sat his mother, Joseph's wife, and Clémence de Sèguy; Joseph was at the clavichord, his father on the sofa with a little book in his hand.

The tender figures and light dresses of the women were surrounded

with soft shadows from the rosy firelight; Clémence held up a pink silk hand-screen which cast a full glow of radiant light over her small sweet features and pale curls.

The pretty whisper of talk was hushed as Luc entered and there was a second's pause, caused, though he did not guess it, by the instant impression of extreme delicacy he made as he stood before the open door, the candlelight full on him, and behind him the background of the dark shadows of the hall.

He was unusually pale, and his eyes were too lustrous, too wide and bright, too deeply shadowed for health. His dark, simple, and rather careless dress, the plain waves of his smooth hair, accentuated the impression he made of something uncommon, exceptional; but this sense of difference was mainly caused by his expression, by a certain smile and flash in his eyes, by an extraordinary sweetness in the lines of the mouth and chin, by a proud look of motion in his carriage which was like swiftness arrested.

His sudden silent appearance made all who gazed at him realize in a flash his exceeding, uncommon beauty; it was as if they regarded a stranger, they even felt afraid of him.

He, all unconscious, came to the table where his mother's tambour frame lay, and affectionately turned over the lengths of silks.

"How quickly you work!" he smiled.

Joseph, to conceal an unaccountable sense of confusion, commenced playing a little old-fashioned "coranto," which was the only piece he knew perfectly by heart.

Clémence expressed her sense of the inexpressible in another way.

"How silent we all are!" she exclaimed, and rose. Luc looked up

instantly.

"I fear I disturbed you," he said; she had come a few steps from the hearth, and their eyes met.

"You look strange to-night," murmured Clémence, as if they had been alone.

"I have come to a resolution, that is all," he answered quietly. "Nothing so very momentous." He smiled, and looked from the girl to his father.

"Monseigneur, I have decided to go to Paris."

The old Marquis put down his book.

"I thought you wished to remain in Aix," he said, in a low voice.

"I cannot," replied Luc. "Father, I must go."

There was a note of almost entreaty in his voice, for his mother had risen and Joseph ceased playing, and he foresaw protest and complaint; Clémence had hung her head; all the old chains tightening about him.

"I must go," he repeated.

"You have been away so much," said the Marquise. "Will you not stay at home now, Luc?"

"Madame," he answered, "I shall return, but I must go, and soon, to Paris."

His father rose.

"But, dear Heaven, what chance have you in Paris?"

"I must make my own chances," smiled Luc.

The old Marquis and Joseph both surveyed him with a certain pride. Luc was indescribably touched to see that mingled look of satisfaction and solicitude on their faces.

He crossed impulsively to the clavichord and the sofa, and held out his hands, one to his father, one to his brother.

"Do not think I am eager to be gone," he said, with a fine flush. "It is only that I have not earned this home--yet."

Joseph thought he referred to his fortune spent at the war, leaving him dependent on their father, and blushed furiously.

"Luc--" he began desperately.

Their father interrupted.

"Joseph, he must go. I understand. He will be the head of the family, and, bred a soldier, he finds this a poor life...You shall go, Luc, but we must see you back soon...Your place is at Aix."

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PART II. THE QUEST SORROWFUL

"Voyez ce que fait la gloire: le tombeau ne peut l'obscurcir, son nom regne encore sur la terre qu'elle a décorée; féconde jusque dans les ruines et la nudité de la mort, ses exemples la reproduisent, et elle s'accroît d'âge en âge. Cultivez-la donc, car si vous la négligiez bientôt vous négligeriez la vertu même, dont elle est la fleur. Ne croyez pas qu'on puisse obtenir la vraie gloire sans la vraie vertu, ni qu'on puisse se maintenir dans la vertu sans l'aide de la gloire."—MARQUIS DE VAUVENARQUES.

I. PARIS

Luc De Clapiers stood on the Pont Neuf gazing over the great city.

Below him curled the strong grey river that surged and swirled round the stout central pier of the bridge; barges and boats with drab and russet sails were passing up and down on the tide; from either bank rose the fine tourelles, the splendid buildings, the straight houses and tall churches of Paris.

The day was sunless, the sky heavy with loose clouds; the steady, cheerful life of the city passed Luc in chariots, coaches, sedans, on foot, and was absorbed into the fashionable quarters on the left and the poorer quarters on the right.

Luc was acutely aware how complete a sense of isolation and of loneliness this standing against the parapet of a bridge with busy footsteps passing and never stopping gave him; all these people were going to, or coming from, somewhere; all might be imagined as having some definite occupation or pleasure or purpose; all might be considered as knowing this city well, as having some claim on it, if

only the claim of familiarity, while he was a stranger with his place still to find.

He had been in Paris a fortnight, and it was extraordinary how like a shut door the city still seemed to him; he felt more utterly apart from the spirit, motion, and meaning of the capital than he had ever done when in Aix.

Inscrutable buildings portentous with locked secrets, inscrutable river laden with boats going with unknown cargoes to unknown destinations, inscrutable faces of rich and poor passing to and fro, beautiful youth in a chariot flashing across the public way to be absorbed in a narrow turning and seen no more, old age on foot vanishing painfully in the dusk; the crowd leaving the opera, the play, with pomp and laughter and comment; the shopkeepers behind their counters, the idlers about the cafès, the priests, the sudden black splendour of a funeral with candles looking strange in the daylight and the crucifix exacting the homage of bent knees, all inscrutable to those who held not the key of it, passing and repassing about the river, and the Louvre and the church on the isle.

Mingled with these actual objects were the spiritual forces of which the city was full, and which were to Luc fully as potent as the things he saw; the air was full of an extraordinary inspiration, as if every man who had struggled and thought and died in Paris had left some part of his aspirations behind to enrich the city.

A wonderful gorgeous history was held in the stones of the ancient buildings, in the holy glooms of the churches, in the crooked lines of the famous streets; her children bloomed and faded, but the city itself was imperishable, a thing never to be touched with decay.

No one once loving this city could ever love another so well.

Luc found the immortal charm of Paris enwrapping him with a sad power; she was the cradle of all the glory of the Western world, the epitome of all that man had achieved in this his last civilization; she had seen all his passions burn themselves out and live again. But as yet Luc was on her threshold, unadmitted, unnoticed.

None of his three letters had been answered. The truth of M. de Biron's advice was being proved every day: he was neither wanted nor heeded; there was no place ready for him nor any hand held out to welcome. Yet Luc, leaning against the heavy parapet and listening to the steady sound of the passing footsteps, watching the deep eddies of the water and the grey outlines of the buildings, felt no discouragement; he measured his soul against even the mighty city, and found it sufficient.

Last night he had walked past the hotel from which the Countess Carola had written. There had been a festival within; all the windows were lit, and the courtyard was blocked with carriages.

Luc had smiled to think of her dancing behind those walls--what if he had come into her presence and asserted his claim to friendship based on that march of horror from Prague?

He had not entered her mansion, nor did he think of waiting on her; why he could not tell, save that all his life he had shrunk from putting his dreams to the test of actuality: and he had dreams about the Countess Carola, visions of her and pleasant imaginings, but no knowledge; he did not care to alter this delicate attitude towards the only woman who had ever interested him. No visions clouded his remembrance of Clémence de Sèguy: she stood out in his mind, clear-cut and definite; he thought he knew her perfectly, to the bottom of her simple soul.

She was pleasant to think on; he conjured up her picture now, rosy,

enveloped in a multitude of frills and ribbons--the grey city seemed the greyer by contrast.

Then the mighty currents of the river swept away her picture as a rose-leaf is swept away by a torrent, and the swish of it against the ancient bridge beat on the heart of Luc the three words: endeavour--achievement--fame.

The dusk was gathering, blurring the lines of the city, and a fine rain began to fall. Luc moved from his station, and walked slowly back to his lodgings in the fashionable Rue du Bac; his father had insisted on his living with proper magnificence, and Luc felt his only sting of failure when he considered the so far useless expenses.

When he entered his quiet, handsome rooms he found a letter.

His servant had been to the inn that Luc had given as his Paris address, and had found this missive, which had been left the previous day by a lackey whose splendour had startled the host. Luc's heart fluttered; he thought of the King, of M. Amelot--

When he had torn the seal, he saw it was from M. de Voltaire.

The great man wrote with charm, with generous frankness: he praised his young correspondent's taste, yet pointed out where it went astray; he warmly encouraged the love of literature, the thirst for knowledge--he hoped the Marquis would write to him again.

Luc put the letter down with a thrill of pure, intense pleasure; the blood flushed into his cheeks and his heart beat quickly; at that moment he felt an adoration for its writer.

He did not notice the darkening room, the rain that was falling steadily without; he sat motionless on the stiff striped sofa forming picture after picture of endless glory, for all his winged fancies had

been stirred into life by this encouragement.

Presently, before the room was quite dark, he wrote the following letter to M. Amelot:--

"MONSEIGNEUR,--I am sufficiently disappointed that the letter I have had the honour to write to you, and that which I sent under cover to you for the King, have not attracted your attention.

"It is not surprising, perhaps, that a Minister so occupied should not find time to examine such letters; but, Monseigneur, permit me to tell you that it is this discouragement, given to those gentlemen who have nothing to offer but their loyalty, that causes the coldness so often remarked in the provincial nobility and extinguishes in them all emulation for court favour.

"I have passed, Monseigneur, all my youth far from the distractions of the world, in tasks that render me fit for the position towards which my character impels me, and I dare to think that a training so laborious puts me, at least, on a level with those who have spent all their fortune on their intrigues and their pleasures. I am well aware, Monseigneur, that the hopes that I have founded on my own ardour are likely to be deceived; my health will not permit me to continue my services at the war. I have written to M. le Duc de Biron asking him to accept my resignation, and there remains nothing to me in my present situation but to again put my case before you, Monseigneur, and to await the grace of your reply. Pardon me, Monseigneur, if this letter is not sufficiently measured in expression.--I am, Monseigneur, your devoted servant,

"VAUVENARGUES"

This letter was written in a breath and on the instant sealed and dispatched; the inspiration to write it had come from the few lines of

M. de Voltaire's note. It was not a letter many would have sent to a Minister. Luc was not versed in the method of addressing the great; he wrote from his heart, urged on by the burning desire for action, for achievement, for fame.

When the letter had gone he went to the window and looked out on the steady rain and straight-fronted houses, lit with the glimmer of oil lamps, that hid Paris from his vision.

What was the cloud, the confusion, the barrier that came between him and the attainment of his desires? There was some key somewhere that unlocked the door of Paris, of life--of that life which meant the scope to exercise, to strain the energies, to put the utmost into endeavour. Where was such a life?

For ten years Luc had been waiting--always round the corner was the promised goal--everything had been beautiful with the glamour of romance. But, looked at coldly, what had these ten years been but wasted? Luc was starting fresh on another road, and seemed as far as ever from the summit of his ambitions. Yet it could not be possible that he was going to remain for ever obscure; he could not believe that.

There was a little narrow balcony with a fine railing before his window. Luc drew the curtains, opened the wet glass, and stepped out. The air was pure and clear, the rain fresh and delicate. The long twisted length of the Rue du Bac glistened with the reflected light of the pools between the cobbles.

Luc thrilled to the mystery and inspiration of the silent city with its hidden activities, to the subtle pleasure of the rain and the lamplight. He thought--he knew not why--of the King, young, ardent, brave, with the riches of the world rolled to his feet--the King--of France!

Luc shivered even to imagine the glorious pride of that position. He leant on the railing, regardless of the rain that was falling, and looked up and down the street that was all he could see of Paris.

A sedan-chair came from the direction of the river, carried by two bearers in plain livery; it was--though Luc did not recognize it as such--a hired chair. It stopped at the house nearly opposite Luc. A gentleman put his head out and said something in a low voice; the chair moved a few doors higher up. Meanwhile from the opposite end of the street came two other men carrying, not a sedan-chair, but a large black coffin, on the lid of which was a shield-shaped plate that threw off the hesitating rays of the lamplight.

Luc watched with interest; his mood was too exalted to feel any horror at the sudden appearance of this sombre object. These little pictures shown him by the great city attracted him strangely. The sedan-chair had stopped; a tall gentleman had alighted and paid the bearers, who turned back the way they had come. None of them noticed what was being borne, shoulder high, towards them.

The sedan passed round a turn of the street out of sight, the late occupant hesitated a second, then came back to the house exactly opposite Luc, who stood only a few feet above him, and could observe him perfectly in the strong beams of the powerful lamp which at this point was swung across the street by a rope from house to house.

The gentleman was unusually tall and of an unusual grace and perfect balance in his walk. He was wrapped in the close, elegant folds of a fine fawn cloth cloak, and wore a black hat pulled well over his eyes. He approached the door and, putting out a hand gloved in white doeskin, knocked four times in succession.

At this moment the coffin-bearers, with a slow, steady, silent step,

had reached the point where he stood, and he, all unconscious, stepped backwards and looked up at the windows of the house where he sought admission (which were all in darkness), and in so doing ran against the foremost man and the foot of the coffin. The street was narrow indeed at this place, and the men, in endeavouring to avoid a collision, made a misstep and thrust the gentleman against the wall with the side of the coffin.

He gave a cry that Luc heard distinctly--a terrible sound of terror, amaze, and despair--and threw up his hands, dropping the cane he carried. The coffin-bearers recovered their balance and passed on muttering, but the gentleman remained crouching against the wall, staring after them, with no effort to move. His terror was so evident and so incomprehensible that Luc held his breath to watch. The stranger's hat had fallen off, and his full powdered curls were uncovered. Luc could see his breast heaving and his hands clutching at the wet wall behind him. Presently he raised his face and flung back his head, as if he were faint or gasping for breath. The garish lamplight fell full on his countenance, which gave Luc a genuine start of surprise. It was the most perfectly beautiful, the most attractive face he had ever seen in man or woman, in painting or sculpture, or, indeed, ever imagined. M. de Richelieu's charm was as nothing compared to the grandeur of this face, which seemed to hold the flower and perfection of human loveliness even now, when the eyes were closed and the colouring hidden by the ill-light.

The expression of the man was as remarkable as his beauty. Luc had never seen such anguish, such fear, such utter terror on any countenance of all the dying and dead he had ever looked on in the war; it was a haunted look--the look a poet might conceive for a damned soul.

After a full moment the man pulled himself together with a long shudder and knocked again desperately. This time the door was

opened almost instantly, and he staggered into the house, leaving his cane and hat on the cobbles.

A second after the door was opened again and a servant stepped out, picked up the beaver and cane, retired, and softly closed the door.

The curious little incident seemed over. Luc stepped back into his room, now in total darkness, and was about to call for candles when the window directly opposite suddenly flashed full of crystal light.

From where Luc stood he had a complete picture of the interior of this room where the light had appeared; it was a very luxurious apartment, and gleamed the colour of an opal across the dusky street. But Luc's attention was arrested, not by the room, but by the two people within it: one was the gentleman who had just entered the house, the other a woman of exquisite fairness wearing a gown of white lace and grey silk. When Luc first looked across she was holding the man by the shoulders and gazing anxiously into his face; with a languid movement of loathing and fear he put her hands down. An overblown white rose fell from his cravat and scattered its petals on the polished floor between them. The lady made a movement of considerable alarm and distress, and the gentleman, who seemed never to look at her, cast himself along a gilt couch, and Luc had another glimpse of his perfect face, with the expression of almost unendurable fear and gloom, as he raised it for a moment before hiding it in the satin cushions.

The lady, who was herself of great beauty, seemed both angry and frightened. She retreated from the couch, then, with an obvious start, saw the uncovered window, came across the room and impatiently lowered the heavy velvet curtain, which, falling into place, completely shut the rest of the little scene from Luc's gaze.

II. A WALLED GARDEN

Luc made little of the incident of the house opposite, but had enough curiosity to ask the doorkeeper of his own hotel who owned the mansion, for the extraordinary beauty and terror of the tall man who had arrived in the sedan remained in his mind even through other thoughts. He was told that both the houses opposite were empty, and only inhabited by a caretaker. It was believed they belonged to some noble who was always at Versailles; at least it was not supposed that they were for sale. Luc, considerably surprised, was drawn by this to give some attention to the house where he had last night observed the little scene through the first-floor window. It was, like the neighbouring mansion, closed and shuttered, and had an air of long desertion; no sign nor coat of arms nor any ornamentation distinguished it. It was neither large nor pretentious, boasted no courtyard, nor even a lamp over the plain door. It became clear to Luc that it was used for some intrigue, romantic, political, sordid, or commonplace, and that last night the lady, shaken out of long caution by her companion's terror, had carried a lamp into a front room, forgetting that the shutters had been taken down. Luc would have thought no more of it, save that he could not easily dismiss the unusual beauty of the face upturned in the lamplight, nor the peculiar sick terror shown by a man, presumably on a gallant adventure, at the, after all, common enough sight of a coffin being carried through the streets.

Yet soon enough his own affairs engrossed him wholly, and the silent little drama was dismissed from his mind.

He answered M. Voltaire's letter; he longed to wait on him, but dare not intrude on the great man. M. de Caumont was now in Paris, and Luc went to see him, taking the eulogy written on his son, Hippolyte de Seytres. M. de Caumont was warm and pleasant, but Luc was not

inspired to show the tender words he had written on his dead friend. M. de Caumont was not like his son. Luc keenly felt the difference; his native shyness rushed over him and tied his tongue. He spoke neither of his hopes, his letter to M. Amelot, nor of M. de Voltaire's letter to him. He left M. de Caumont's hotel with a feeling of slight depression, and was walking absorbed in sad thought down the quiet street when a coach drew up and Carola Koklinska's voice hailed him.

Luc paused and uncovered. The coach was at a standstill beside the posts that divided the footway from the road; the blind had been pulled aside, and the lady was looking from the window. Luc had recognized her voice instantly; he would not so soon have recognized her person. She wore a dark red "capuchin" closed under the chin, and her hair showed in the folds of it, white and stiff with pomade.

"You in Paris!" she said swiftly. "Why was I not to know?" she added gravely.

His real reasons would have seemed absurd in speech, and he was slow with inventions; he blushed and looked at her seriously.

"I am going home," said Carola. "Will you come with me, Monsieur? I have a garden I should like to show you."

He bowed in acceptance, still silent. Her lackey dismounted from behind and opened the coach door; Luc stepped into the interior, which was lined with white satin and full of a keen perfume,

He took the seat opposite the Countess; she occupied the whole of hers with her full skirts, which were of gold brocade of an unusual Eastern pattern, and the long clinging folds of the crimson "capuchin."

Her dark face looked the darker for the powdered hair; the cheeks were still hollow, but all her outline was curved and soft, and her lips were a warm, pale red; her rather sombre eyes were clear and reflective in expression. She wore diamond ear-rings of remarkable size and brilliance, and all her garments and the appointments of her coach showed of noticeable richness. Luc reflected how unaware of her wealth and position he had been when they were climbing the Bohemian rocks together.

"I thought you would come to Paris," she remarked. "Do you wish to enter politics? You should be at Versailles."

"Why, perhaps, Madame," assented Luc. "But Paris is very interesting to one who knows so little of the cities of the world as myself."

She gave him a full look.

"Oh," she said slowly; then she added, "But you must meet people, know people, court people--and every one worth meeting, knowing, courting is at Versailles. Shall I help you?"

"I should be deeply grateful," answered the Marquis simply. "I have no acquaintances at the Court."

Carola did not answer; she was gazing out of the window. He had already, in Bohemia, guessed her to be a woman of few words, and this impression was confirmed, for the only opening for conversation they had--the campaign of last year--she never mentioned.

The coach drove soon through the massive gates of an hotel that Luc took to be the residence of her brother-in-law, and the Marquis handed her out at the steps of the fine door; it was not the house that had been pointed out to him as the Hotel Dubussy. As he alighted he

noticed a light curricle pass along the street driven by a lady ostentatiously placed high and alone on the box with a black servant behind. Her dress was pale and showy; veils and ribbons flew behind her. The passers-by stared, and so did Luc, for he recognized in her fair, slightly over-opulent beauty the woman whom he had seen last night in the house opposite.

"Who is that lady?" he asked, for the Countess was looking at her very keenly.

Carola again gave him her full, almost blank glance.

"I do not know," she answered, rather strangely, he thought, then added, all in a breath, "Do not let us go into the house; I want to show you the garden."

She led the way to a door at the side of the mansion--a tall door with a ring-shaped handle--and, opening it, beckoned the Marquis to follow her. They went down a narrow stone passage with a wall one side and the house the other; then the opening of another gate admitted them into the garden.

Luc had been prepared for splendour of statuary, walk, arbour, and fountain, after the designs of Lenotre, or perhaps some Eastern fantasy of trellises and hanging creepers. What he saw, as Carola Koklinska motioned him to pass her, was utterly different.

He found himself in a large garden bounded by high walls on all sides save one, where the sombre, dark pile of the mansion overshadowed it; a narrow, neglected gravel path ran round under the walls, from which it was only separated by an unkempt edging of long grass and thick-leaved weeds. At the extreme end of the garden, which was of considerable length, was a row of seven very tall poplar trees which caught the last rays of sunlight in their topmost

branches. For the rest the garden was a mere stretch of fresh May-time grass neglected and growing tall enough to bend in a sad fashion before the slight evening breeze.

Near the poplars was a plain wooden seat, and behind this showed the sole flowers in the garden--a clump of wallflowers growing out of, and on, the high brick wall.

Luc noticed the poplars first, for their great height and straightness reminded him of the silver firs in Bohemia, then the flowers, their sturdy charm and the bold lustre of their colouring.

"Do you like this place, Monsieur?" asked Carola, as she closed the door behind her.

"It reminds me of a convent or a prison, Madame," he answered; "but it is doubtless a fair place for meditation."

They were walking slowly down the gravel path, towards the poplar trees. Luc looked back and saw that the windows of the house were all shuttered, and that there was no sign of life.

"Is this your sister's hotel, Countess?" he asked.

"No," she answered; "mine. I told you that I came to Paris to attend the Queen; but I have left that employment. I lead a life of leisure. I am not so often at the Court."

"Forgive me," he said, for he felt as if he had asked her for an explanation; "but I thought you wrote to me from the Hotel Dubussy--"

"I did," she interrupted. "Madame Dubussy is my sister; but I no longer live there."

Luc looked at her and smiled.

"Do you know that I passed her house the other night and wondered if you were within? There was a great festival. Some one told me it was the Hotel Dubussy, but when I saw this house I thought perhaps I had been mistaken."

Carola drew the slim folds of the red "capuchin" over her stiff skirts.

"You are now in my house, a little outside the Porte St. Antoine. It is rather a lonely part of Paris," she said. "I have not been to my sister's house for some weeks."

Luc did not answer. He liked her measured speech; she was careful with words. His rare dealings with women had taught him that it was an unusual gift in them. Even his mother at times threw words about in a cloud regardless of their meaning, almost of their sense, and he had known little Clémence de Séguy deal in tangled periods that left her panting and worsted by her own language. But Carola used the foreign tongue that was so familiar to her with cautious care; her almost hesitating choice of sentences gave her a marvellous air of sincerity.

"Perhaps," she continued, "you are wondering why I live here. You used to call me 'Mademoiselle' in Bohemia, but I am a widow."

This fact, that explained both her wealth and her freedom, gave him that shock always given by a discovery about some one of whom we have known nothing, but imagined much.

"I should have realized that, I think," he said simply; "but you seemed to me very young, Madame."

They had now reached the bench under the wallflowers. Carola seated herself.

"I am thirty," she said; "I looked the same at twenty. The man I was with in Bohemia was my husband's brother. Madame Dubussy is his sister. Now tell me about yourself. Why did you come to Paris?"

Luc smiled; his whole exquisite face changed and lit. There was nothing in his heart that he could explain to a woman; the idea of it made him smile.

"I intend to enter politics, as you surmised," he answered. "I am a poor man, Madame, and have had to begin my career afresh."

"Did they want you to remain in Aix?" she asked. "My family? Yes."

"But you have a great ambition, Monsieur."

He was still smiling.

"How do you know so much about me?" he asked.

For the first time an expression came into her serene voice; it was an expression of tenderness.

"Anyone would know everything about you, Monsieur, by looking at your face," she answered; then she turned and picked a spray of wallflower from behind her and turned it over and over between her fingers.

The Marquis seated himself on the other end of the bench; he was wondering what whim caused her to keep this dreary, closed-in, barren garden, what fancy made her bring him there, where they were as remote from the world as they had been when enwrapped by the Bohemian snowstorms.

The whole square of grass was in shadow; only in the upper leaves of the poplars the reluctant light still quivered. The air was rather cool

and the sky a dome of colourless light.

"There is a street at the end of the garden," said Carola--"the Rue Deauville, still the place is very quiet."

"Will you continue to live here?" he asked, for this abode seemed neither like her home nor the residence of any wealthy noblewoman, pretentious to stateliness though it was.

"No," answered the Countess. "I am going to Vienna this summer."

She was still occupied in twirling the sprig of wallflower and did not raise her eyes. The gorgeous quality of her appearance, delicate and complete, was an anomaly with the humble and neglected garden. Her hood had slipped back, and the long, stiff grey curls hung against her neck and threw up the dusky shadow under her chin.

"It is strange enough," said Luc, "that we two, meeting so curiously in war-time, should be sitting here in this utter peace."

"Do you regret the war?" she asked.

He would not answer that. She saw the pride that held him silent in the profile turned towards her.

"You are better suited," she said, "for war than politics, Monsieur."

She was looking now at him, not at the flower turning in her fingers.

"My God," she cried, with sudden soft force, "I wonder if you know what kind of work politics is!" He thought of M. de Richelieu.

"I know well enough," he said; "but there are great men still in France, and I am resolved to serve the King."

"Have you seen the King?" she asked quickly. "No, Madame."

"Ah, well, they call him Louis the Well-Beloved, do they not?"

"How could he be otherwise--young, glorious, brave, the hope of France?" A flash came into his voice and he raised his brows in a little frown, as was his habit when excited.

Carola Koklinska moved in her seat, so that her silk mantle fell apart over the long sheen of her gold gown.

"You must come to the fete at Versailles next week," she said.

"M. de Caumont, who is a friend of my family, requested my presence there with him," answered Luc. "Shall I see you there, Madame?"

"Yes--oh yes."

Luc was pleased with this meeting. Carola's gravity, reserve, the slight mystery of her background all encouraged the abstract ideas of strength, purity, and spirituality that he had associated with her image.

"I have often thought of you," he said, with a very tender chivalry, "and always as an inspiration."

She coloured painfully.

"You are on the quest of glory, are you not?" she asked in a breath.

"You have my secret," he answered, half wistfully, half proudly. For the moment both his reserve and his strength gave way before the impulse to utterly confide in this strange, cold creature and take her

comfort, her admonitions, maybe her praise; but he checked the desire, though she might have read it in his hazel eyes as he turned them softly, yet mysteriously, on her. She rose, and he hardened instantly into utter reserve.

"I have no company to-night, or I would desire you to stay," she said. "Some time you must come. I hope you will be very successful, Monsieur le Marquis."

The words were very formal, but as she spoke she held out her right hand. Luc took it as he formed his answer, and dropped his grave eyes from her face to her fingers.

A curious little shock of 'surprise and dismay brought the colour to his cheeks. On the Countess's forefinger was a diamond ring curiously set round with points formed of sapphires--the very jewel Luc had flung at the feet of the page in the Governor's house at Avignon, or its exact counterpart.

"Why are you silent?" she asked rather haughtily, and withdrew her hand.

"The ring you wear reminded me of another I saw in the possession of some one so different from you, Countess, that the mere connexion gave me a start."

"Which ring?" She wore several.

"The diamond, Madame, on your first finger."

"That is very extraordinary!" she exclaimed.

"In what way, Madame?"

She flushed now.

"Oh, I did not know there were two such rings, that is all." She seemed desirous of dismissing the subject, and he had no excuse for pressing it, though he wondered that she should not carelessly have told him how she came by the jewel, and so have set at rest his first impression--that she was wearing the actual jewel M. de Richelieu had offered him as a bribe.

"I hope I shall see you at Versailles," she said. She was walking towards the gate, and her stiff skirts rustled on the untidy gravel path. "I think you are on a sorrowful quest," she added timidly; "forgive me."

"Believe me that I am happy," he answered gravely.

Above the dark bulk of the house was the primrose-coloured moon, a thin crescent; there was a shiver in the air. Luc looked at the Countess, and thought that her eyes were suddenly flushed with tears.

"If I could help you, if I could prevent it," she began passionately, then checked herself and held out, curiously enough, her left hand. "Good-bye," she said.

He kissed her fingers and left her. As he passed along the darkening street before her house he thought that he had never known the fading of the sky and the first glimmering of the moon of such poignant beauty.

III. A PAVILION AT VERSAILLES

The Marquis took lodgings the following week in the little town that centred round the palace and park of Versailles, and there met his former colonel, M. de Biron.

The young Duke was amiable, if cynical, at Luc's persistence in endeavouring to enter politics; he came to his rooms and attempted to enlighten him as to the state of the Court and the characters of the men who guided it. Luc smiled and forgot what he said as soon as the words were spoken; he knew M. de Biron was shallow, and he gave little weight to his impressions of men or affairs.

M. de Caumont had offered to present him to the King, but had not yet arrived at Versailles; and M. de Biron urged him not to wait, but to at once attend His Majesty.

Luc's strict code of courtesy would not permit him to slight M. de Caumont by ignoring the introduction offered and accepted; but when M. de Biron brought him an invitation for one of the fete days on which the King would not be present, he decided to go, with some bold idea under his shy manner of meeting M. Amelot and speaking to him directly.

He was now corresponding regularly with M. de Voltaire, and though the subject of their letters was still the respective merits of Corneille and Racine, Luc drew from the great man's words a far wider inspiration than mere enthusiasm for the famous poets. He had always--almost without knowing it--been fond of letters, and now, in his unavoidable leisure, he had begun writing down his thoughts, and hopes, and aspirations.

The very day that he went for the first time to the palace he had put the last sentence to a paper he had written on the glorious and beloved young King.

Since he had left Aix his desire for meditation had increased and emphasized his shyness, which was almost sufficient to render him awkward despite his native grace and breeding. Certainly his first experiences of the chateau were not pleasant to him; the gorgeous

park was too vast, too full of people. He felt too utterly uncongenial to their obvious gaiety. Not that his temper or his mood was gloomy, or that he was incapable of the exquisite pleasures of youth and carelessness--there was probably no one there who could have brought a keener delight to the enjoyment of the fair things of life--but Luc had too fine a nature to be satisfied by sensation at second hand. Because every one else affected light-heartedness, because the coloured lamps were lit in the trees, because all were rich and presumably happy, his soul could not keep festival.

M. de Biron soon left him. He felt as lonely as he had done when standing on the Pont Neuf, and as serene. As soon as he could disengage himself from the crowd he made his way from the terraces, arbours, and fountains in front of the great chateau, and turned down one of the magnificent alleys that opened mysteriously and alluring into dusky vistas lit only by occasional beams from the young moon.

He walked rapidly, his spirits rising with the solitude. He had soon passed the garlands of rich lights swung from tree to tree, the couples walking slowly with swish of silk, soon completely lost sight of the wonderful palace raised up luminous against the spring sky, and distanced the fine strains of music from the violins and hautboys.

He reached a beautiful glade across which deer were wandering; the silence was so marvellous that he caught his breath. Regardless of where he was, of Ministers, of M. de Biron, he continued his way through the spring night. The trees were almost in full leaf, and not a tremble disturbed their dignity. Luc crossed the glade and came into a little grove of elms, beyond which a small lake lay argent and motionless.

A sudden gust of perfume made him shiver with pleasure. All round the water were planted thick rose bushes full in flower; the long trails

of foliage and blossom fell over and touched the smooth surface of the lake. A little bridge of twisted rustic wood led to a pavilion that shone, shaded with delicate trees, from a tiny island on the bosom of the water.

A peach-coloured light issued from the windows and open door of this pavilion and fell in long, still reflections across the water.

In a thicket of white thorn beyond a nightingale was singing, and there were clouds of a pearl-blue colour lying softly about the moon.

Luc paused by the bridge; the exquisite enchantment of the place and hour captivated his senses. He drew a sigh and bent over the roses; their perfume came and went like the drawing of a breath. The nightingale halted in his importunate song and was still. Luc could not stay his feet; he softly crossed the little bridge and approached the door of the pavilion that seemed the centre of this magic spot.

The flood of tremulous pink-gold light showed more roses clustering close about the doorstep: white roses these, turned now to all hues of soft amber and ivory and shimmering away into the luminous shadow that concealed the walls of the pavilion.

Luc supposed that this was but one of the lavish festal arrangements; he had seen several pavilions in the park, though none as remote as this. As there was not a sign of movement nor any whisper of voices he thought the place empty.

With his usual light step unconsciously still further subdued he entered the pavilion.

It was one room, oval shaped, with white walls and ceiling and four windows shaded with peach-tinted silk and open on the lake.

On the panels between the windows hung delicate drawings in pastel

framed by gilt ribbons, and in front of one window was a small table of kingswood, which bore some tall Venetian wineglasses and a blue enamel dish of bonbons. The furniture consisted of a low couch covered with pale rich satin cushions all embroidered with garlands and coronals of flowers, several chairs of the most delicate shape and make, and a gold clavichord and harp, both wreathed with natural white roses.

The light came from a silver lamp shaded with silk that hung from the ceiling.

In one corner was a pink satin screen, and as Luc's first glance was satisfying him that he was alone in this delicious apartment, a gentleman came round this screen and stepped to the nearest window, evidently without seeing the Marquis, who was, indeed, half in the shadow of the outer air. This gentleman was of an appearance befitting the occupier of such an exquisite place. He wore a white velvet coat so embroidered with gold and pearl that the skirts stood stiff about him; his waistcoat was pale violet silk glittering with crystal flowers; his sword-hilt was gold and diamond; and there were diamonds in the black cravat which fell over the gorgeous lace on his bosom. This much and the extreme grace of his tall person Luc noticed in an instant; in the next he was aware that he looked at the man whom he had seen a few days before in the Rue du Bac cowering before the black coffin. Even though he could only see a profile and the long grey curls that flowed beside it he was sure.

Almost immediately the gentleman turned and was looking at him with a pair of great dark blue eyes of a marvellous colour and lustre. The face proved as fascinatingly beautiful as Luc had believed from his brief glimpse. The expression was now reserved, haughty, and melancholy; the perfect mouth with the dark upper lip, that showed how deep-hued his hair was beneath the powder, was set firmly, the cleft chin slightly raised. Handsome as the face was in line of feature,

the most noticeable thing about it was the superb colour of the eyes--literally a sapphire blue, soft and yet flashing and vivid as the tint of a summer sky at even. Luc had read of such eyes in poetry, but had never thought to see them looking at him from a human face. With one hand, half hidden in the delicate lace at his wrist, holding back the fine silk curtain that concealed the silver lake, the gentleman stood, very much at his ease, and addressed Luc.

"Do I know you?" he asked languidly.

It seemed to Luc an extraordinary question.

"No," he answered on a smile. "I am, like yourself, one of His Majesty's guests."

The other seemed to consider that answer with a kind of cold reflection; his superb eyes travelled over Luc's person with an open scrutiny which the Marquis resented.

"I break upon your leisure, Monsieur," he said.

"Stay," answered the handsome gentleman calmly; "I am tired of being alone. Perhaps you are amusing."

Luc smiled again.

"Are you in want of amusement, Monsieur," he asked, "on such a night--in such a spot?"

The blue eyes stared.

"Such a night?" their owner repeated blankly.

"Do you," asked Luc, "see no difference 'twixt one night and another?"

The beautiful face smiled.

"Why, you are amusing."

Luc laughed out loud.

"I never was thought to be so before," he answered.

The gorgeous stranger moved the pink screen behind him and revealed a small gilt table covered with cards. "Do you play?" he asked.

"I never had the time or the money," said the Marquis simply. "You do?"

"I was the finest gambler in France, they say, before I was ten years old," was the listless reply; as he spoke he took the white chair before the card table.

"Why, those who brought you up have something to answer for," smiled Luc. He took off his hat and seated himself on the corner of the sofa, an elegant dark figure in his deep blue velvet against the light background.

The other man was silent a moment, then he said in an even voice--

"God judge them--I think they have."

He interested Luc intensely, by reason of his great beauty, his tragic melancholy, and something indefinable in his manner that Luc could not place. He was obviously a noble--possibly a great noble--but his air was the air of some class Luc had never met. He was as much puzzled by it as if he had suddenly found himself talking to some shopkeeper of the Rue St. Honorè in disguise as a gentleman, or

some foreigner passing as a Frenchman; yet he could not have named what this man did or said that was out of the ordinary.

"Monsieur," he said, "you seem to me very melancholy, and yet, methinks, you appear one of fortune's favourites."

"In what way?" was the almost wondering answer.

Luc was near moved to laughter again, then to a great pity.

"You have youth and health, I know, Monsieur, and, I think, money and leisure--probably a great name and power. Am I right?"

"I have all those," answered the other wearily. "But what have those things to do with content?"

"There are men," smiled Luc, "who have neither money nor health nor power, only great ambitions--unsatisfied."

"Ambitions!" The blue eyes widened.

"If you have power you can gratify your ambitions, doubtless, Monsieur," remarked the Marquis dryly; "but you seem to me one who hath known nothing but ease."

The other leant forward a little; his gaze was fixed on Luc in an interested fashion.

"Who are you?"

Luc's shyness returned.

"I was a soldier," he said briefly; "I am now merely M. de Vauvenargues, who has still his use to find."

"What do you wish to do?"

"To serve the King," answered Luc without affectation. "The King! I suppose it is a profitable employment to serve the King."

The sneer was so manifest that Luc replied with some warmth--

"No, Monsieur; but it is honourable, and I look for honour."

"Then," returned the gentleman with even deeper scorn, "you are unique in France."

Luc flushed to his brow and his reserve vanished again. "If you think that," he replied earnestly, "it is clear that you have never been with the army."

"The army!" repeated the other with an air of cynical haughtiness, and Luc began to be impatient with the gloomy voluptuary who appeared to be sunk in such a sloth of mind that he was incapable even of appreciation.

"Had you been with us during the retreat from Prague, Monsieur, you would know how real heroism can be; there was neither profit nor glory for many thousands there who lay down to die in the snow--content to serve the King."

The stranger gazed at him without a change of expression.

"What do you hope for at Court?" he asked.

"I have nothing to offer but my zeal," replied Luc, "and I expect nothing but some scope in which to serve His Majesty."

He was answered by a short laugh.

"I repeat that you are quite unique, Monsieur."

"There are more men in France than you or I could count, Monsieur, who feel as I," returned Luc proudly, "and you are unfortunate that you have spent your life in such a fashion as never to have met them."

The other narrowed his eyes with that superb insolence that seemed to Luc at variance with his obvious high breeding.

"I can assure you," he said, "you are unique—at least in my experience," he added, with no softening in his voice, which was as beautiful as his person, but marred with an inflexion of gloom and scorn.

Luc rose; he longed to be out in the night again, alone with his own aspirations.

"We waste time very foolishly," he said. "Pardon me that I intruded on you, Monsieur." He turned towards the door and looked with joy on the moonlit lake.

"Waste time!" repeated the other; "you use extraordinary words. How can one waste what is so endless, so wearisome?"

Luc paused, with his hand on the pale, glimmering door. His impulse was to leave without more words, but as he looked at the other man the circumstances of his first knowledge of him, and the sumptuous beauty of this spoilt favourite of fortune, moved him to further speech; curiosity and a certain almost passionate contempt stirred him. For this man was not like M. de Richelieu; he redeemed himself with no gaiety or wit or energy, but seemed too proud or too supine to make the least effort to please or even to comprehend others.

"How old are you?" asked Luc abruptly.

"Twenty-seven," was the answer, given in a kind of haughty surprise.

"And tired of life!" smiled the Marquis. "Is there anything in the world you have not enjoyed to satiety? is there anything under heaven you are not weary of?"

The other answered with deep melancholy.

"You are quite right, Monsieur, there is nothing that can give me the least pleasure; I find everything very miserable and stale."

"Yet," said Luc, thinking of the black coffin, "probably you are afraid of death."

The cynic crossed himself with a trembling hand and paled perceptibly.

"How dare you use that word?" he cried. "Have I not said that I will not hear it? But those who believe are saved," he added, with more animation than he had yet shown, "and I am saved, for I believe. No one can say that I am not a religious man."

"You hang between loathing of life and fear of damnation, then," returned Luc, marvelling. "Monsieur, I very greatly pity you that your superstitions bring you no greater comfort."

"Superstitions?"

"I take it you are a Christian," said the Marquis calmly. The other shrank back from him.

"And you?" he asked.

"I follow a creed that enables me to smile at death and hell-fire," said Luc simply.

"An atheist!" murmured the stranger. "Well, you are damned," he added with a sullen satisfaction. He crossed himself again and muttered a few words of a prayer. "There are too many of you in France," he continued, "and now I think you begin to creep into the Court."

"We speak of matters too deep, Monsieur, for our acquaintance," answered the Marquis.

"An atheist!" repeated the other. "How can God's blessing be upon us with such corrupting France?"

The grossness and superstition of this man's slavish religion fired Luc to a sudden fine wrath.

"It is such as you, Monsieur, who corrupt Court and city and nation," he said quietly; "such as you, dulled by luxury, enervated by ease, afraid of death, afraid of life, staled by amusement and frivolity, cynical of any good in others, contemptuous of honour and glory--it is such as you who cause the people to curse the nobility--yea, even to shake them in their loyalty; it is such as you who have no right to serve the King with your weary flatteries; it is such as you who are not needed in this our splendid France."

"I--not needed?"

"I speak as a soldier and plainly. I am no older than you, Monsieur, and not of your doubtless great position, but I have seen things--seen men live and die with no hope or reward save the glory of serving the King of France."

Luc's grey eyes lost their dreaminess as he thought of the young monarch who was his lodestar.

"Little can I offer His Majesty but an unstained sword; but that is more worthy of his acceptance than anything your wealth could bring."

The wonderful blue eyes darkened with a sneer. "You have a high conception of the King!"

"Yes," smiled Luc proudly. "I know what real loyalty is--no courtier can teach me. I have walked among the dying, who eased their torments by murmuring the name of King Louis. I have beheld men spurred to great achievement by the thought of him; his name is a power that you perhaps cannot conceive of. I believe with thousands that he will, in the splendid ardour of his youth, lead France to greater glories that she has yet attained. Louis the Great will be overshadowed by Louis the Well Beloved!"

His thin cheek flushed with enthusiasm; he looked beyond the gorgeous pavilion to the exquisite night.

"His Majesty is to be envied," said the other coldly.

Luc drew a deep breath.

"To be envied! Imagine, on such a night as this, to stand beneath the heavens, young, a king--and King of France! The whole world waiting to give you her best--the power, the scope, the ardent love and devotion at your feet. Ah, Monsieur, to be such a man is to almost pass humanity."

He turned impetuously to find his listener watching him curiously with the same expression of cold melancholy, and a certain chill came over his own ardour.

"I do not know why I speak so," he said with a flush, "nor why I have been drawn to talk at all."

"Because," replied the other wearily, "you are a fool." He yawned and then gave a little sigh.

Luc's instant anger as instantly died, for there was something tragic in the beautiful face so utterly hopeless, so blind to the spiritual, so weary of the senses.

"Good night, Monsieur," said the Marquis gravely.

The other made no answer. His blue eyes fluttered lazily from Luc and rested on the floor; his chin sunk on the jewelled laces on his breast. The absolute indifference of his manner was a marked discourtesy. The Marquis gave him a narrowed glance and left him.

As Luc saw the water, the sky, the roses, and the moonlight, the image of the jaded, sad, and sneering young man went from his mind; he could not think melancholy thoughts on such a night of gold and pearl, dark trees and fragrant flowers.

IV. DESPAIR

As Luc stood at the window of his modest bedroom the night of the fete, he was thinking of two definite themes, curiously woven and twisted into one strand of reflection.

The first theme was the diamond ring he had seen the Countess Carola wearing. He wondered how she came by it, and he was rather vexed by the thought that perhaps the page had never told his master it had been refused, but kept and sold it secretly; for that it was the same jewel he had held in his hand in the Governor's house at Avignon that was now in the possession of the Polish lady he did not, in his heart, for a moment doubt.

The second theme, in no way connected, yet mingled, with the other,

was the man he had held that curious conversation with in the fairylike pavilion at Versailles--a man with life strong within him, yet tired of life, the most melancholy of spectacles, and one new to Luc.

While men like this one and M. de Richelieu held the great places of the land, perhaps M. de Biron was right in saying that penniless, unsupported zeal would find no scope in Paris.

Perhaps, after all, Roland was dead at Roncesvalles, Charlemagne buried, and all the peers perished, taking chivalry with them to their graves.

The moon had long since set, and a vivid dawn was spreading above the housetops of the little town.

Luc softly opened the window and looked out, up and down the bare, silent little street, fresh and clean in the new light. Supposing it was all a delusion, supposing glory always evaded him, vanished into clouds of disappointment, supposing he was always met by the cold look those blue eyes had turned on him last night?

Ah, well, in that case it would have been far better if he had died with Hippolyte de Seytres in Prague or with Georges d'Espagnac among the snow and darkness. And Carola--his highest thoughts had clung to the vision of her very tenderly. But what did he know of her?

In the cold silence of the dawn he asked himself if he loved her, if she was worthy to be loved; also what her eyes had said when she raised them from the wallflower stalk she was turning about in her long, expressive, smooth fingers.

He thought those eyes, so full of inspiration and courage and eagerness, had said, "This is love--somewhere between us--shall we find it or lose it?"

He trembled at the thought, which he had, till now, never dared formulate; but he could not dismiss it. That look of hers had touched his conception of her with fire. He now admitted to himself that he had been stung keenly to see her wearing a jewel once in the possession of M. de Richelieu; it caused him to think of the wretched magician's last words, addressed to the young Duke: "Beware of her who comes from Bohemia!" He found himself wishing that she was neither so wealthy nor so highly placed; yet it was no matter to him. If she was worthy to be loved he could love her as Rudel loved the Lady of Tripoli, and she need never know it even. He sternly checked his thoughts. What did he know of her? She was a foreigner; her conduct towards him had been always cold; and he--he had his place to find, his way to make, his goal to achieve.

He closed the window and sat down rather wearily, resting his head against the mullions. The little room was full of a melancholy light, the furniture enveloped with heavy shadows. A large black crucifix above the curtained bed showed distinct and gloomy; it recalled to Luc the noble of the pavilion, with his horror of death, his distaste of life, weighed down by the shadow of the Cross, blind to the roses, yawning in the face of the moon.

He rose with a little shiver and began pacing up and down the room; his old fierce yearning for his former life suddenly rushed over him. He wanted to be away from all these people, out on the march again with his beloved companions, Hippolyte and Georges.

He paused and clutched the back of a chair in his effort to control this sudden passionate desire for the past, and fixed his eyes on the square of lightening sky above the roofs that were slowly beginning to take on colour and shape and shadow.

A decided but light knock at his door recalled him to commonplace things. He glanced instinctively at the brass bracket clock near the

window; it was a little after three o'clock. He wondered who could be rousing him at this hour, and almost persuaded himself that he had not heard the knock, when it was repeated, firmly, twice.

The Marquis went to the door at once and opened it. Immediately outside, half obscured by the dim shadows of the landing, was a young man, fully dressed like himself.

"Your pardon, Monsieur," he said at once, in an even, sweet voice; "are you not an Abbè?"

"No," answered Luc, greatly amazed.

"Ah, forgive me; I thought I had been told that an Abbè lodged here." He seemed slightly disappointed, but made no movement of leaving.

"Are you staying in this house, Monsieur?" asked Luc.

"Yes; I have the chambers opposite." He glanced with a smile at Luc's blue velvet and black satins, court sword and powdered hair. "You have not been sleeping either, I perceive," he added.

"I was at the fete last night," answered the Marquis, "and fell into thought when I returned, and now it seems strange to go to bed by daylight."

The young man hesitated a moment, while Luc held the door courteously open.

"Are you alone?" he asked at last.

"I have my servant—he is asleep in the other chamber."

Again the other hesitated, then said with a kind of wistful earnestness--

"Monsieur, would you come to my room and keep me company a little while? I thought if you had been a priest I could have asked this in the name of God. As it is, may I ask it in the name of our common youth, our common humanity?"

"I have no reason in the world for refusing," answered the Marquis; "but if you require a priest, shall I not go for one? There is, I think, a convent near by."

The young man shook his head.

"No, if you will come, Monsieur—just for a little while." Luc closed his own door and followed the other across the landing into the room opposite.

He found it was much larger than his own and rather gloomily furnished. The house was old, and the floor was sloping in this room and the two windows with the deep sills had slightly sunk; the walls were panelled in black waxed oak, and the ceiling was low and beamed.

A heavy bed, with dark blue brocade curtains drawn closely round it, stood in one corner, and near it hung a long mirror in a thick tortoiseshell frame; in the murky depths of the greenish glass the rest of the chamber was reflected.

A brass hand-lamp and an hour-glass stood on a circular worm-eaten oak table between the windows, from which the sombre tapestry curtains had been looped back.

Hanging on the wall above this table was a black crucifix similar to that which the Marquis had in his own apartment.

The few chairs were large and worn, with sunken seats and arms

polished with much use. The occupier of this ordinary, yet gloomy, apartment offered one of these chairs to the Marquis and took one himself, seating himself with his back to the light and his face towards Luc.

The light, though increasing every moment, was still grey and colourless, and only entered with difficulty through the deep-set small windows.

Luc looked keenly at the stranger.

He saw a man of no more than his own age, of the appearance of a well-bred gentleman, dressed in a worn suit of dark red corded tabinet, with a plain muslin shirt ruffled at the neck and wrists; he wore a simple sword, ornamented by a bunch of steel tassels hanging from the scabbard, and a lady's handkerchief, deeply bordered with lace, beneath the black band of his neck ribbon.

Owing to the way in which he sat and his attitude, with his head slightly bent, Luc could not clearly distinguish his features; but his hair, which was a bright brown, inclined to reddish, and gathered into a club, was full in the meagre light of the window.

"In what way can I serve you, Monsieur?" asked the Marquis. He was slightly interested, slightly diverted, but weary mentally and languid after his sleepless night. His pure, proud face was thrown up by the strengthening dawn against the old black chair in which he sat, and his deep grey eyes rested on the other with perfect courtesy and perfect serenity.

"I am the Marquis de Vauvenargues, formerly of the *règiment du roi*," he said.

The young man moved suddenly, looped the curtain yet farther back,

and pulled his chair round so that the light fell over his face; it was like taking a mask from his features, so suddenly were countenance and personality revealed.

He had, as the Marquis noticed with a slight sense of horror, something of the look of Georges d'Espagnac in his fair, regular outline; but his expression was one of hopeless despair, keen wretchedness, and bitter self-contempt. His light brown eyes were sunk and shadowed, his mouth strained, his cheeks hollow; over his whole face was a bluish tinge that contrasted with the bright colour of his hair. This might have been caused by the chill, hard light of the dawn, or the effect of ill-health. Whatever the reason of it, it gave him a peculiar, ghastly appearance.

Luc sat forward in his chair; for the second time within a few hours he was looking at an expression of absolute despair on a young, fair face. He compared the two countenances--the seen and the remembered--and there was this great difference in them, that, whereas the noble in the pavilion had revealed the bitter languor of satiety, the faded distaste of life caused by unending pleasure and cloying luxury, this man looked like one who had burnt out his soul in some useless endeavour, and was now on the verge of uttermost failure.

"Monsieur," said the Marquis, not without a tremor in his tone, "why did you ask my company?"

"Ah," replied the other, in a voice that had retained more of its youth and freshness than his face, "you are afraid that I am about to disturb your tranquillity by some recital of grief; but you need not be. And besides," he added, "you are as serene as a very old monk who has never left his cloister--I can see it in your eyes."

"Not so serene," replied Luc, "that I am not troubled by the sight of

despair, and I have looked on it before this night."

"Very well, Monsieur," was the answer; "return to your room and forget I ever broke in upon your meditations."

"Who are you?" asked Luc.

"A painter--perhaps a poet."

"What have you done with your life," asked the Marquis, "that at your age you seem so hopeless?"

The painter smiled bitterly.

"I have wasted all my years in the quest of glory."

Luc felt the blood beating at his heart.

"And you have found--?" he questioned half fearfully.

"I have found that there is no such thing as glory on earth. And I have no belief in any heaven."

As he spoke these words his face took on another tinge of pallor and a certain rigidity came over his features, giving them a look of death.

"You are unfortunate," said Luc; "but you cannot say glory is not there because you have not achieved it with a paint-brush and a few yards of canvas."

The painter broke into long and harsh laughter.

"That is good, very good!" he cried. "And you still believe in it, though you have failed to gain it with your sword and your cannon and all your noisy details of war?"

The Marquis rose and paced up and down the waxed, uneven floor. The painter's laughter ended suddenly.

"If you could question the god, the creature, the beast who made me," he said fiercely, "you would see that I commenced my life searching for the ideal--the ideal love, the ideal work, the ideal reward at the end of it; and though my heart was pure, my courage high, and my industry enormous, I failed in everything--the world played me false every time, every time; and now I am a moral bankrupt, who does not even possess the asset of hope."

"You have had terrible experiences, to make you speak like this," answered the Marquis, in a moved tone.

"I have had all experiences, and I have found out that glory is only the lure used to beguile us to our wretched, our solitary ends."

"I think," said Luc, "you never discovered the true meaning of it."

The painter lifted eyes in which there gleamed the feeble remains of what had once been the noble fires of enthusiasm and ambition.

"I understand the meaning very well," he replied; then he rose from his chair and stood looking out at the neat quiet street.

Luc was silent. Tremendous thoughts assailed him--why could he not bring comfort down from the clouds to console this man?--why could he not lend him a spark from his own fire to rekindle the desire for glory in his breast?

Presently he said--

"Monsieur, you are still so young." The words sounded commonplace even to himself, and the artist made no answer.

"I should like to see your pictures," said the Marquis. Now the light was strengthening, he observed a pile of canvases standing against the wall by the side of the bed.

The painter answered without turning his head--

"I painted a picture once that Watteau, or Boucher, or Fragonard might have been pleased to sign. It was a portrait of the woman I loved."

"Where is it now?" asked Luc.

"In her house, I think. I found her in the gutters of St. Antoine--she left me in a silk dress I had starved myself to buy. I never succeeded after that, and as I went down she went up, and now you will find very high personages indeed at her little suppers. She is now, I believe, a spy among the Courts of Europe--and once she was my inspiration," he added, in a dry tone.

The sordidness of this disgusted Luc.

"It is weakness to pin your fortunes to the skirts of a woman," he said.

The painter looked at him.

"Are *you* going your way uncheered by any thought of any woman? Can you manage without laying your ambitions at some one's feet?"

Luc flushed.

"I have never met the woman who could break my heart," he answered.

"Yet--" added the painter. "As for my picture," he continued, "I took

her, for some reason, as Bellona, with the hounds in leash and her drapery carried by a light wind. The drapery was very well put in."

The daylight was now full in the sombre room, and the dark furniture stood out clear against the shining walls; it fully revealed, too, the young artist, and showed that his peculiar pallor was no trick of light, but the colour of his face.

Luc watched him keenly. There seemed a wildness in his words, in his expression, in his action in asking for the company of a stranger, that made Luc think that perhaps some anguish had sent him out of his wits; but even while he was thinking this, and wondering what comfort he could offer, the painter turned in a perfectly composed manner, and raising the hour-glass from the table between the windows, looked at it with a smile.

The sand had nearly run through.

"Now I will keep you no longer, Monsieur," he said, in an even voice. "And if you wish to see my pictures--there is one I should like to show you, a little later in the morning; it is not yet quite completed."

Luc could see no brushes, paints, or easel in the plain bedchamber, nor any sign that the painter could finish any canvas; again he thought he detected a wildness in the man's speech.

"I shall be glad to see you again," he said. "I fear this visit, Monsieur, has been of little use; but since you would give me no confidence, I could give you no consolation."

The painter smiled; he was still looking at the hourglass.

"Where there is no hope, how can there be any consolation?" he replied. "You have rendered me all the service I required--half an hour's company."

He set down the hour-glass, went to the door and opened it.

"You are searching for glory, are you not, Monsieur?" he asked, as Luc passed him. "Well, the word is a lie; there is no such thing—it is all a cloud of delusion; and when you have pierced the cloud, you find there is nothing there but the blankness of despair."

"No!" cried Luc, with energy. "No!"

The painter shook his head in contradiction with a ghastly smile and closed the door on the Marquis, who heard immediately the bolts being slipped into place.

V. THE PAINTER

Luc heard that the King and M. Amelot had returned to Paris early the same morning that he had been in converse with the young painter. There was now nothing to keep him in Versailles: he had not seen the Countess Carola, and yesterday M. de Biron, who was now rejoining his regiment, could tell him nothing of her. She was probably still in Paris.

Versailles, at least, had no attractions for Luc; he was more than ever anxious to see M. Amelot, as a second crisis had arisen between France, Austria, and the advancing power of Prussia. Now Fleury was dead, greater things were hoped from the diplomats of Paris, and Luc believed that he might find this a favourable moment for obtaining employment in politics.

A few days before he came to Versailles he had heard from his father; he re-read the letter now, and it revived the sense of the dead weight of the chains of home. His father was waiting eagerly for news of his success; his mother wanted him back, and sent anxious

inquiries after his health; Joseph and all his friends would have been so happy if he would have returned after his hardships at the war and settled down in Aix--

Why could he not do it? He loved them all; he often felt ill and lonely. Why not go back and forget these vain visions that M. de Biron so laughed at? Why not marry Mademoiselle de Séguy and take up the life his father and his brother were leading? His sense of responsibility towards his parents was heavy: they had done everything for him, he nothing for them; he grudged even the money his stay in Paris was costing. Joseph had never been able to afford to come to Court.

That they should be indulgent, even making sacrifices for him, was the last intolerable chain; how could he proceed on his way fettered by obligation, burdened by affection and sentiment? He wept a little over this love that was so rare and precious, and yet so useless!

He almost wished that he was penniless, friendless--*Master* of himself, with no one to care if he lived or died; a state that was supposed to be the epitome of human misery. But the man so situated was at least free.

Other thoughts instantly checked and thrust this aside, but it had been formed.

After all, what all these conflicting emotions amounted to was that he must in some way justify himself; must obey the passionate impulse within him, and obtain a scope for his energies.

He left his chamber, and walked near the great park where he had met the beautiful young noble in the peach-coloured light of the pavilion last night. One sentence of his kept recurring to Luc; it was the only moment when he had shown any glimpse of feeling, and it

was when Luc had said, "Those who brought you up have something to answer for," and the young man had answered, in a moved tone, "God judge them--I think they have!"

Luc felt sorry for him, but contemptuous too; he wondered if he should see him again entering the house in the Rue du Bac, or if the adventure of the coffin had caused him to abandon his place of rendezvous. Somehow Luc did not think he would risk the narrow street again after dark. How extraordinary cowardice was--

The Marquis could not remotely conceive the fear of death as an active factor in anyone's life.

As he sat over his dinner in an inn near the populous market square, he thought of the young painter whose quest for glory had brought him to despair, even to madness. Glory--what was it that so many, in this frivolous age, pursued with panting breath and staring eyes? The great sceptic Voltaire, even as the great believer Bossuet, had been swept on to achievement by the desire of it; the blue-eyed noble who might have had it by lifting his finger sat inert and melancholy; the obscure young artist was livid with anguish because he had missed it. Where was it, what was it? A kind of frenzy, a wordless exaltation; perhaps the only sign there is of the godlike in man; the gateway to the infinite; the talisman that would turn the world to gold and heaven into a reality; the pursuit of the San Graal; the journey to the land of Canaan; the search for El Dorado, for the Islands of the Blest--under all these symbols had the quest of glory been disguised. Luc trembled in his heart, for who had yet found the Fortunate Isles?

By the time he returned to his lodgings, his servant had packed his portmanteau and had the horses ready for their return to Paris. It was considerably past midday, and later than he had intended; he thought of the artist, and asked Jean if he had seen him go out.

The man answered "No," and Luc crossed the landing and knocked on the door opposite.

There was no answer, and after waiting a little, Luc, who was already in his riding-cloak, turned the handle and entered the sombre, old-fashioned bedchamber where he had found himself in that morning's dawn.

He then saw that his servant had been mistaken, for the painter had certainly gone out; the room was empty.

The Marquis was leaving again when he noticed on the dark table between the windows where the brass lamp and hour-glass stood a folded piece of paper. He approached, and saw it was addressed to himself. It contained only a few lines, and was unsigned.

"MONSIEUR,—I am unfortunately obliged to leave you on a journey I have long contemplated. As you were courteous enough to wish to see some of my work, you will find my first and last masterpiece on the bed—I call it 'The End of the Quest of Glory.' It has the merit of truth, at least."

Luc glanced round the room: not a thing had been disarranged—some clothes even still lay across a chair; a portmanteau stood, loosely unstrapped, at the foot of the bed. Luc felt an absolute conviction that no one had left this room since he had himself, several hours before—save one way—

"Suicide," he said, and folded the letter across. Then, with a callousness that surprised himself, he went to the bed and pulled aside the heavy blue brocade curtains, which were drawn closely together as they had been before.

He saw what he had expected to see: the young painter, prone and

still, with fixed open eyes and a sneer on his stiff lips.

Luc stood gazing; his serene brows contracted with an expression of pity, anger, and regret. He stooped and laid his hand on the dulled hair of the young suicide, damp with the death-agony.

The coverlet was slightly disturbed by the last struggle of departing life, the dead man's limbs slightly contracted, as if he had died in the convulsion of a shudder. His left hand and arm lay across his breast, showing that his final action had been to draw the curtains about him.

Luc thought of the bitter sarcasm of the letter, and the hand he laid on the painter's forehead quivered. There was no mark of any violence; the young painter had evidently made an end of himself with poison.

Luc moved away from the bed; he checked an almost mechanical impulse to lay the melancholy crucifix hanging above the bed on the dead man's breast, and, moving to the canvases piled against the wall, turned the first two or three round. They were marked and defaced by a knife, which had completely disfigured the original paintings.

Luc looked no more. A sword lay across a chair, and near it an open snuff-box filled with gold pieces. The Marquis felt a blankness of all sensation save weariness and aversion. He left the room and called the servant of the house, and soon the chamber of the dead was filled with people, with question, curiosity, wonder.

Nothing, it appeared, was known of the dead man. He had come a few days before by the coach from Paris; he had given his name as Henri de Beze; the day before he had paid for his week's lodging. He had received no letters while in Versailles, nor, as far as could be known, had he sent any. No one had visited him, but he had been much from the house.

Nor did a search among his effects provide any further information. If he had had any papers, he had destroyed them. He had died with his story, which might have been common or tragical, wrapped at least in the dignity of silence.

There was enough money in the snuff-box to pay for his decent burial. A manifest suicide, and one who had died without absolution or any of the offices of the Church, his grave would be in the lonely strip of land outside consecrated ground where play-actors and vagabonds and Jews were laid.

Luc returned to his own room, his head sick with fatigue, and seated himself by the window. In the commotion, his departure for Paris had been delayed; he wondered if he should return to-day. A slackness had fallen on his thoughts.

While he was answering the respectful questions of the master of the house concerning his brief acquaintance with the dead man, he had been recalling his short stay in the painter's chamber during the dawn of this same day. Evidently the painter had drunk the poison before he had asked for company, and Luc had been talking to a dying man who was measuring his life by the grains of sand in an hour-glass; for Luc recalled how .he had taken up the hour-glass, and seeing that the sands were nearly run through, had abruptly ended the interview.

Luc found himself picturing what had happened in the room after he had left it. He had heard the door bolted--but afterwards the dying man had altered that with some change of thought, probably when the idea of his ironical letter occurred to him.

"He had a bitter humour," thought Luc, with a sweet amaze. As for himself, the melancholy, the disgust, and the pity roused in him by the hopeless cynicism of the young painter's sudden end had not

extinguished or even for a second damped the fires of his own ardour; they only burnt the clearer and brighter in contrast with the gloom he had just witnessed in two other human beings--the luxurious, soulless youth and worn-out painter. He felt like a man walking on an upland in the full light of the sun, while below him others struggled through the mists and morasses, shadows and sloughs of a dismal valley, and never lifted their eyes to the sun. He might look down on these blinded people, he might pity, though he could not comfort them; but they could not long trouble him nor put a shade across his bright path.

As he sat at the window watching the clean empty street, a very handsome equipage swept round the corner, swinging on its leathers.

With a faint flush Luc recognized the liveries and arms of Carola Koklinska, and when the coach drew up before the door his heart gave a little lift into a region that knew not melancholy.

He saw one of her servants descending, and on a sudden impulse went down himself. The house was still full of the tragedy, the modest establishment disorganized; the doctor and the magistrate's clerk were busy in the chamber of the dead man. Luc met the lackey in the doorway, and a sudden confusion seized him that perhaps the Countess was not in the coach, or perhaps had not come to see him.

While he hesitated, the servant inquired if he was M. de Vauvenargues. Luc responded, and added, "If your mistress is in the coach, I will come and speak to her."

Then, before the man could answer, he caught sight of the Countess at the coach window, holding back the stamped leather blind.

Luc, bare-headed and with the sun shining in his loosely curled fine

hair, came to the coach step.

"I found out from M. de Biron where you were lodging," said Carola, "and called on my way back to Paris to leave a message for you, Monsieur."

She spoke in her usual cold, rather precise accents, and her delicate face was rather sad and tired in expression.

"You were not at the fete last night," she added. "I wished to present you to M. Amelot."

"Madame," he answered, "I was there, but certainly did not see you."

The Countess leant a little way from the window of the coach; she had a gold and scarlet figured scarf round her dark, unpowdered hair.

"What has happened?" she asked. "You look--strange."

Luc remembered that he had not been to bed that night, and was, despite his inner exaltation, feeling giddy and weary. Of late he could ill stand any fatigue; he recalled also the suicide that for the moment he had completely forgotten.

"A man died this morning," he answered gravely, "in the room opposite mine--died by his own hand, Madame."

"You must be so used to death," she answered. She looked up at the house, and straight, as by a kind of instinct, at the drawn heavy curtains of the painter's room. "Who was he?" she asked.

"Why should I sadden you?" he answered. "And who the man was, no one knows."

"Oh," she answered quickly, "it does not sadden me at all." She smiled wistfully. "But you are very pale, Monsieur le Marquis."

Luc looked into her clear, ardent brown eyes, that were fixed on him with an eager and intense expression. A wave of faintness came over him; he felt impelled to catch at the long embroidered window strap that hung over the side of the coach door to prevent himself from falling. He could make no answer.

"This is my message," said the Countess, rather hurriedly and in a lowered voice: "I want you to come to my garden to-morrow about four o'clock. Knock at the door in the Rue Deauville--you remember that it is the street that runs at the end of the garden. You will know the door, for the knocker is shaped like a woman's head."

Luc caught his breath; he was still feeling dizzy. His look was a question as to what she meant.

"Do you care to come?" she said. "It is a question of politics."

"I am very honoured," he answered formally.

"You can be of use to me," remarked the Countess. "I shall be grateful if you will come--but perhaps you are not leaving Versailles so soon?"

"Yes," he replied, "I was leaving immediately. Of course I will come, Madame."

She sighed and leant back in her coach.

"Very well, Monsieur, the Rue Deauville."

Luc bowed, and the sumptuous coach rolled noisily down the narrow cobbled street.

VI. IN THE GARDEN

Luc stood in the Rue Deauville before a flat, narrow door in the high wall behind which rose the tall poplars of Carola's garden.

He took the knocker in his hand and looked at it; it was, as the Countess had described, a woman's head, smoothly cast in bronze, and the face had a reserved yet wild expression, a look of terror and bitterness.

A soft little wind was blowing, and the sun was extraordinarily bright. Luc looked up and down the street with an idle, unexplainable reluctance to knock. He did not care for the rendezvous—he did not even greatly wish to see Carola; he felt to the full the desire that had more or less possessed him of late—the desire to be alone and free—even from those things he loved and admired.

When he at length did knock, the door was opened instantly, and the Countess stood the other side of the portal. He saluted her gravely, and passed into the queer, lonely garden.

They stood for a moment side by side between the trunks of the poplar trees. She wore a light cloak like a man's riding mantle, and her black hair was unpowdered.

"I am glad you have come, Monsieur le Marquis," she said.

"I have come wondering why you asked me, Madame," he answered.

She led the way to the one seat beneath the wallflowers, and when they reached it turned and replied—

"I always liked you, I always wanted to serve you. Ambition is so splendid! You have the makings of a great man."

Luc coloured and looked at her gravely.

"I too have always been ambitious," she continued, with a slight nervousness; "but women tire--and they cannot achieve what men achieve." She paused a second, then added hastily, "I can put you on the path to obtain what you desire."

Luc had the impression that she was not saying what she really wished, but was confused by some agitation into, contrary to her wont, using evasive words.

"You leave me at a loss, Madame," he answered, with a gentle dignity. "I only understand that you condescend towards me, and for that I am proudly grateful."

Carola glanced quickly at the firm yet sensitive and delicate lines of his profile--for he did not look towards her as he spoke. She seated herself, but he remained standing.

"Since I was a young girl I have moved among Courts,--France, Austria, Russia,"--she said, "and I have made the acquaintance of some powerful people." She pressed to her lips a little handkerchief embroidered with gold thread. "One is in the house now--I want you to meet him. He has, I know, a post for you, if you will accept it."

The Marquis answered earnestly

"I only wish for some scope in which to work, Madame--the humblest position, if it will but allow me the bare chance of--some achievement."

Carola suddenly held out her hand.

"I wish I knew you a little better!" she cried, with sudden passion. "I may be making a blunder, Monsieur!" Luc glanced at her in surprise.

"I think you know all there is to know of me," he replied, with a slight smile. Indeed, his life had been so simple, so open in outward action, that she might, by the simplest inquiries from M. de Biron, have elicited all of it and his character too.

"We none of us know each other." Her outstretched hand rested on his plain basket sword-hilt. "You might surprise me a hundred ways, and I you. When you are absent from me, so many things I should like to say rise in my mind; when you come, you bring a barrier with you that makes speech impossible."

Luc's hazel eyes darkened; with his ungloved right hand he raised hers from the steel shell of his sword.

"You see, Monsieur," she added proudly, "that I admit to thinking of you."

She rose, leaving her hand in his. They were of a height, and he looked straight into her face, which was fully illuminated by the strong beams of the sun. He could see the fine lines round her large, misty eyes, the red powder rubbed into her cheeks, and the veins showing under the dark skin of the hollow temples and thin throat. Her thick lashes and slender brows were artificially darkened; the sun showed the bluish look of the pencil round the heavy lids. He noticed that her hand was very cold in his.

"You are different indeed!" she exclaimed, with a certain bitterness.

"Different?" he asked.

She withdrew her hand.

"From all of them!" She appeared to be struggling with some excitement or agitation. "What is in your mind? Where are you going? What do you mean to do? You will have to use the world as you find it--like every one else."

Luc smiled.

"I am so exactly the same as every one else, Madame," he said, in a deprecating tone. "I am just struggling for some little sphere in which I can let my soul spread its wings--I have that restlessness to achieve something which many better men lack," he added, thinking of his father and Joseph; "yet I dare not profane it, for it is the highest thing I know." He fixed his eyes on her gravely, and she moved towards the wallflowers, away from him.

"I wish I had left you alone," she said.

Luc flushed swiftly.

"Have you found me so ungrateful?"

"You have nothing to be grateful for," she replied, narrowing her eyes on him. "I only fear that some day you may come to dislike me."

She had not said or done anything to destroy the mental image he cherished of a slightly mysterious creature, fiery and pure, disdainful of the world and at heart tender and a little sad; he therefore smiled at her words, which he thought showed her ignorance of his conception of her, and looked at her with his serene, enthusiastic glance, before which her dark eyes fell.

"You are very sure of your own creeds," she said irrelevantly, "and narrow too, at the best--I think."

He admitted to not following her thought, and she answered his admission by a half-scornful, half-terrified little laugh.

"Do you really not understand me?" she asked.

Luc felt a sudden beat at his heart, as if his life was about to fulfil its most splendid promise; his eyes were dazzled by her face, which seemed to him to be suddenly illuminated from within and transfigured. Her actual presence and his cherished vision of her were for that moment fused in one; he saw her robe edged with flame, and her head crowned with points of light, and her eyes of a steady and immortal brilliance.

"Is it possible?" he said. "Is it possible?"

"You know if it is or no," she answered, and took a sudden step towards him with her head high.

To his unfaltering gaze she was as unsubstantial as the sunbeams about her and as mysterious as the living flowers growing in the dusty old wall.

"I cannot believe it," said Luc--"that this is going to happen to me!"

"Hush!" she whispered, "hush!"

If he had put out his hand he could have touched her, but he made no movement, and she paused when there was a foot between them.

"Won't you speak to me?" he said. "Tell me how much I may dare?"

She never ceased to gaze at him.

"You know--everything," she answered. "Why need we speak?"

"I know nothing," murmured Luc, "and I am afraid to guess."

"Afraid!" echoed Carola. "I too am afraid, bitterly afraid."

She turned her eyes from him and sank on to the seat with her head bent.

Luc stepped impulsively towards her.

"I have dreamt of you so often," he said gravely; his lips were quivering and his eyes filled with tears. "You could never understand--"

He laid his hand very lightly on her cloak; she looked up suddenly and said almost fiercely--

"Do not kiss me--do not touch me."

He would as soon have thought of trying to clasp the rainbow or press his lips to a moonbeam. He started, and flushed, and winced.

"Not you," she continued. "I could so easily hate you if you were to bring it to that. I also have had my dreams."

She was suddenly stripped of glory; her voice was even a little harsh, her attitude of shrinking distaste had nothing of the divine in it. Luc stared at her with a sudden terror; she seemed to be changing under his very eyes.

She rose again, drooping yet stately, and drew her cloak about her.

"Nothing has happened!" she exclaimed vehemently. "Do you hear--nothing has happened!"

"Why do you deny yourself?" cried Luc. "Why are you lying to me?"

"Nothing has happened!" she repeated; "nothing. Keep your dreams."

It seemed to Luc that she, while she spoke, was looking beyond him at some one else, and with a throbbing brain he turned and gazed towards the gloomy back of the house.

There was, as he had expected, a man coming slowly towards them.

Luc stiffened and narrowed his eyes.

"This is the man who will be useful to you," said Carola, in an ordinary tone.

The stranger, who wore a black velvet mantle and a hat with a high white plume fastened by a steel loop and button that glittered in the strong sun, approached at an easy gait. When he uncovered to the Countess, Luc recognized, with an angry heart, M. de Richelieu.

The Duke marked him with instant and unmistakeable surprise.

"Is this your friend, Madame?" he said, in no pleased tone.

"You know each other?" asked Carola.

"We have a slight acquaintance," answered the Duke grandly.

"One I shall not presume on, Monsieur," said Luc, burning to think that perhaps M. de Richelieu thought he wished to solicit the benefits he had once refused.

"You did not expect to see me nor I you," replied M. de Richelieu, absolutely composed and courteous, "but our previous knowledge of each other need not interfere with the matter on hand now."

Luc bowed, not at all satisfied. He did not desire any favour, direct or indirect, from M. de Richelieu; he did not like to see him on these terms of intimacy with the Countess; he did not wish such a man introduced into his life.

The only thing that kept him from proudly taking his leave was the conviction that both Carola and the Duke had been quite innocent of planning the situation, she being ignorant that M. de Richelieu and he had met before, and the Duke being unaware that her *protégè* was M. de Vauvenargues.

Therefore Luc felt that his refusal to listen to their proposals would be ungrateful to Carola, and put him in a foolish position towards the Duke, who had already gracefully carried off the encounter.

The Countess on her part appeared confused; she obviously wondered when these two had met, and why Luc had not mentioned his acquaintance with the Duke.

"You know M. le Marèchal!" she exclaimed. "Then my task--to bring you to an understanding of each other--is the lighter."

"I understand M. de Vauvenargues perfectly," answered M. de Richelieu; and, as if unwilling to prolong the conversation, he turned back towards the house.

Luc, regarding him with an habitually keen observation, noticed that he was considerably older than he had appeared on either of the two previous occasions on which Luc had seen him.

In the lurid lights of the barn, in the shadowed softness of his own luxurious apartment, he had seemed in his first youth; but now the direct sunbeams that showed the red powder on Carola's fine skin revealed the face of M. de Richelieu as that of a man of middle age,

despite his slender, upright figure and careful dressing. His charm was none the less; his slightly broad countenance wore the same expression of almost irresistible daring gaiety and serene self-confidence. Luc smiled at him in his heart, and so was half won.

The three entered the house by a side door and ascended a back staircase. Luc thought the place seemed little used, a great mansion often shut up. He neither saw nor heard servants.

Carola went ahead with M. de Richelieu; he, as if disdainful of being overheard, said in a voice hardly lowered--

"You have chosen the wrong man, Madame; but if you wish to go on with the comedy, I shall not interfere."

Carola's reply was such a mere murmur that Luc did not hear; nor did he care what she said. He was content to leave this doubtful adventure in her hands--whichever way it ended, he would come to some issue with her before he left.

They entered upon a long wide corridor, the heavy candelabra and gilt-legged furniture covered with linen on which the dust lay thickly; the floor was of black and white squares of marble, the windows were shuttered, the air struck musty and yet chill.

Carola opened a high door half-way down this corridor, and the two men followed her into an ornately furnished room, where the sun streamed in a melancholy fashion over silk screens, silk-hung walls, carved chairs, and Eastern rugs. The room had an air of having been long deserted or only used casually; the sunbeams showed dust everywhere, and one of the wings of the elaborate shutters was still closed.

On a long crimson-striped sofa lay Carola's hat, gloves, and cane.

She seated herself near on a fantastic chair of a Chinese pattern; behind her was a picture covered by a faded pink curtain.

Luc looked at her and at nothing else. The presence of M. de Richelieu was no longer anything to him; he was waiting for the explanation of this mystery,--Carola Koklinska,--an explanation that had seemed on the point of being revealed in the garden. What was she?--did she or did she not fulfil his ideal of the spiritual power of perfect woman?--did he love her as he knew he was capable of loving? He stood against the closed shutter with his grave hazel eyes on her face. She was colourless save for the false blush on her cheeks: he disliked that artificial glow, and thought of her as she was among the Bohemian snows, haggard and disfigured, yet more pleasing to him then than now.

M. de Richelieu glanced from one to the other with an eye of hawk-like brightness.

"Do you wish me to speak?" he asked Carola, and cast his hat on to a little tulip-wood table.

She bent her head, and the Duke turned with a quiet magnificence of manner to Luc.

"Monsieur le Marquis, may I have--for a little--your attention?"

With an effort Luc took his eyes from Carola; he was not concerned with what M. de Richelieu had to say.

In an even voice, with the air of one who courteously, but without conviction, discharges a duty, the Duke began speaking. He related, from the inside, politics that Luc knew already from the outside; he gave details of the present state of affairs between the Courts of France, Austria, England, and Prussia; he indicated the web of

intrigues that was continually being spun beyond the scrutiny of the public eye. Luc listened without interest; he had already guessed that M. de Richelieu intended, through the influence of the Countess, to offer him some adventurous chance in politics, and he had already resolved to refuse—he began, in fact, to understand.

Even while the Duke was speaking, Luc's mind was still busy with the problem of Carola. Once or twice he allowed his glance to rest on her: she was seated with her pallid face supported between her long ringless hands; her cloak had fallen apart, and a crystal heart that hung round her neck by a thin silver chain swung and twinkled above her knees.

M. de Richelieu proceeded to unfold a plan for the confusion of Maria Theresa. A young man had been prepared and instructed for the principal role in this intrigue, but unfortunately had lost his life in a duel; and Madame la Comtesse having declared she knew of some one to take his place--The Duke paused.

"What is the task you wish me to undertake, Monsieur?" asked Luc, without raising his head; while the Duke was speaking, a great many things had become slowly plain.

M. de Richelieu told him with an almost crude brevity. He was to go to the Austrian Court and proclaim himself neglected by his country; he was to offer to serve Maria, the unfortunate Empress-Queen; he was to creep into her confidences, and forward them to the French Ministers. "Madame la Comtesse is going to Austria," finished the Duke; "you would work in collusion."

An extraordinary calmness came over Luc. He slightly moved his attitude against the shutter.

"In what capacity, Madame, are you going to the Court of Austria?"

he asked.

She made no answer.

The Duke looked steadily at Luc.

"You refuse, of course?" he said.

The Marquis smiled.

"I thank you, Monsieur, for the compliment. Your position is awkward--and I am grateful for your courtesy." He pressed his handkerchief to his pale but firm lips.

The Duke gave a little bow.

"You did not understand?"

"No--but now I do."

Carola, still holding her head in her hands, looked with great tragic eyes from one to another. M. de Richelieu crossed over to her and laid his hand on her shoulder.

"I always promised you, Madame, that you should have your own way in your whims--and I have done what you asked me to. Unfortunately, Monsieur de Vauvenargues .refuses."

"He has had no time to consider," she said, without changing her attitude.

Luc stepped from the window.

"One word, M. le Duc--this is your house?"

"Yes," answered M. de Richelieu, with the slightest lift of his delicate brows.

"You know that," breathed Carola; "from the first you must have known--"

"No," said Luc. "I am from the provinces."

The Duke's clear glance went from one to another; he spoke very gravely, with an even pride.

"I told Madame she had made a mistake. Perhaps Madame will explain?"

He picked up his hat.

"Shall I leave you to explain?" he insisted, looking full at Carola.

"Leave me to solve my enigma," said Luc, with a smile. "Give me five minutes, M. le Duc--"

"Are you so quick?" responded M. de Richelieu. "I will give you half an hour in which to weary of guessing your riddle."

His charming face relaxed into a soft and fleeting smile, he bowed low to the haggard lady on the sofa, and left her alone with Luc.

VII. A PICTURE

Carola moved her long hands so that they covered her face.

"What are you?" asked Luc dreamily. "What are you?"

She dropped her hands and looked at him.

"I do not know. Whatever men label me, I think. To you at least I was a beacon of pure flame--was I not?"

"You have quenched that light now, Madame," he answered quietly.

"I could not believe that you had not found out--till you came to-day," she said. "And yet I wondered, too--for you are one of those who care--"

She rose, erect in the stiff folds of her brocade gown.

"So you will not come to Austria?" she asked.

He smiled. "Did you think I would? You know my ambitions."

Some passion ran through her and tightened her whole frame; she clasped her hands together and pressed them against her bosom.

"Do you dare to despise me?" she cried. "Do you accuse me of fooling you?"

"I fooled myself," he answered quietly. "You seemed to me wonderful."

The real blood outshone the paint on her cheeks.

"Am I less wonderful," she asked, "because I come from the gutter?--because I am a wanton and spy?"

"Not less wonderful to M. de Richelieu," answered Luc, "but to me you no longer exist save as a shadowy riddle. That can be no grief to you, Madame."

She unclasped her hands and raised her head; she took up her hat and flung it down again; she cast herself on the settee and pulled at

the heavy lace on her bosom. All the while he watched her, never moving.

"I wanted to help you," she said, breathing quickly. "It is not my fault that you blindly accepted me--M. de Biron must know. I wished to help you ever since we tramped the snow together in Bohemia."

He thought of her with the dead child in her arms and holding the dying head of Georges d'Espagnac; he looked at her tenderly.

"Poor soul!" he whispered.

The words seemed to sting her into fierceness.

"Am I so soiled that you pity me?" she demanded. "I pity you too--you who are flinging everything away for glory--glory!" She laid a passionate sneer on the word, but Luc was unmoved.

"I believe that you wished to help me--I think you must have a generous soul, Madame. But you cannot help me."

"So it seems,"--she became slack and weary again, and the blood ebbed from her face,--"and yet there was a chance for one not so nice about his means."

Luc raised his hand and let it fall.

"Before I go, tell me why you wished to help me. I cannot understand why you should have any interest in one so different from your world."

She buried her face in the cushions at the head of the sofa and did not answer.

The room seemed very silent and remote to Luc; the dusty motes in the sunbeams conveyed a sense of desolation; they seemed very far

away from the world. The windows looked on the neglected garden, and there was not a sound from without.

He stared at the woman with the hidden face. His vision of a flame-like purity, scornful of the world, yet kind, serene, and lovely, was gone for ever, but towards this creature who was so brave, so mysterious, yet so commonplace, so rare and yet so cheap, the tool of party intrigue, the slave of men like M. de Richelieu, he felt a cold pity, a cold tenderness, a disenchanted interest. She had been slowly revealed to him from the moment that M. de Richelieu crossed the long grass towards them; she was now as plain to him as she ever could be. He did not regret so much this exposure of the uses to which she had put her gift of lovely life, but the fact that she had been able so long to fling a false glittering light over his own path.

But now he was completely free of her; this light was, as he had told her, for ever quenched, and those higher, holier fires that were the true objects of his devotion burnt the brighter and more gloriously.

She lifted her face; it was pale and marked on the cheek with a red line from the rough bullion edging of one of the cushions.

"I wonder how you would judge me if you knew the whole truth?" she said. There was a weakness in this that yet further cast her outside his sympathies.

"Neither you nor I know the whole truth of anything," he answered.

"You are too courteous." Her voice had sunk to a trembling whisper. She seemed very angry. "Why do you not tell me to my face that you think yourself degraded by my mere presence? Dear God, I wonder where you will find the woman you imagine! You are too severe for this frivolous age!"

Her delicate railing meant nothing to him; he felt as he had felt in the Governor's house at Avignon--like one who has been diverted from his path, and is anxious to return to it. He took up his beaver and his green cloak.

His serenity seemed to exasperate her almost beyond endurance; she sat up on the sofa, and the crystal heart depending from her bosom shuddered with her distressed breaths.

"What have I done to you?" she asked frantically. "What have I done to you? Never heed others--what have I done to *you*?"

He answered her gently.

"In truth, nothing. I shall never have anything to say against you--why should I?"

She eyed him keenly and made another attempt to get within his guard.

"Why do you refuse my help?"

"Because I will not pay the terms," he answered even more gently, and stood with his cloak over his arm waiting his dismissal.

"You *do* scorn me," she urged.

"Believe me, Madame, no."

She paused and beat her foot on the ground.

"I will go," he said, "if you are willing."

"Stay," she answered; "listen. There was one time--when you were on your knees to my image--when you *almost* loved me, when you

thought of me as your wife."

He coloured and did not move.

"You thought I was too wealthy and too great a lady, but you had dreams of me. Just now, in the garden, you were ready for my signal."

"Well?" he said unsteadily. "Well?"

"Would you make me your wife now?"

Luc stared at her, the red deepening in his face. "M. de Richelieu would be willing," she added. "Madame!" he cried. "I am noble."

Carola laughed.

"I have touched you at last," she answered feverishly. "You *do* despise me."

Luc was silenced and convicted; there fell a silence neither could break. The brilliant sun was hidden by a cloud, and a greyness entered the gorgeous but dreary little room.

"Good-bye," said Carola at length.

She rose, and so unsteadily that she had to catch hold of the sofa for aid; it slipped back under her hand, and the movement dragged the faded red drapery from the picture behind her. A brilliant oil-painting of a dark-haired woman clad in drapery ruffled by a light wind stepping through an undergrowth of fairy bushes with two hounds in leash, flashed out on Luc.

Something stirred in his memory; he saw that the face was the face of Carola herself, younger, more blooming, and more gay.

"Who painted that picture?" he asked.

She looked swiftly over her shoulder; then went behind the sofa, picked up the drapery, and flung it over the heavy frame.

"I thought it had been moved," she murmured.

"You were the model?" asked Luc. "And the subject is Bellona?"

"Yes.". She looked bewildered.

Luc saw again, very clearly, the old-fashioned chamber in Versailles and the young suicide lying there; he saw this picture perhaps even more vividly than the dark-eyed woman watching him from behind the striped settee.

"What is the matter?" asked Carola heavily.

Luc collected himself and took a step away from her while he looked at her with sudden flashing keenness.

She was bare indeed now, bare of the last glamour of any illusion--"from the gutters of St. Antoine," the dead man had said. Her brocades, her jewels, her paint now seemed to hang on her as so many rags that made no pretence to hide the stark crude thing they fluttered round. Luc could not believe that a little while before she had dazzled his vision--she was no longer even mysterious. He had nothing more to say to her; a weary disgust sealed his spirit; his face flushed with changes of thought, but he ended on silence.

"Ah, you are moved now, I think," said Carola, in her old precise tones--"by what, I wonder?"

Luc put his hand on the door knob; he had nothing to say to her.

"Will you not even speak to me?" she asked; she was gazing at him with great intentness.

He opened the door and went out, closing it after him.

In the corridor he found M. de Richelieu seated on one of the linen-covered chairs, whistling a little air under his breath and beating time to it by delicate movements of his bare right hand. Seeing the Marquis, he rose.

Luc paused; the two men were face to face. Luc noted that M. de Richelieu's handsome eyes were full of amusement. He could not wonder; he smiled too, with his head a little thrown back.

"Who was she?" he asked; "eh, M. le Marèchal?"

The Duke slightly lifted his shoulders.

"I don't know. She is quite marvellous. She came from "--he opened and threw out his hand--"nothing."

Luc bowed.

"Adieu, Monsieur. I regret if I have incommoded you by this visit--forgive my ignorance."

"I am still in your debt," returned the Duke. "Tell me, now we meet again, is there any way I can serve you?"

He spoke with a winning air of grandeur and perfect courtesy. Luc responded--

"Yes," he said suddenly, "you can present me to M. de Voltaire."

"With the best will in the world," replied M. de Richelieu. "You are, I

perceive, already something of a philosopher. Where is your lodging?"

"In the Rue du Bac."

"You shall hear from me."

The Duke accompanied him to the dark side staircase, directed him carefully as to his way out, and then took leave of him.

Luc passed out of the house, out of the garden into the courtyard, through the great iron gates, and so into the untidy, sordid street that led to the wretched noisy quarter of St. Antoine. The sun was out again, vivid and steady; it would be shining over a certain poor funeral in Versailles. Luc felt sorry, as much for her as for the dead man; possibly she was the finer material. He wished that he had never seen either of them.

A strong Eastern scent clung to his cloak; he shook it out to the wind and turned home.

VIII. VOLTAIRE

Luc dismissed Carola Koklinska from his thoughts as he would have brushed a dead leaf from his coat, but he could not so easily banish the sensation that something distasteful and sad had occurred; this clung to him like the vague remembrance of an evil dream. His stately lodgings seemed more lonely; the aspect of the city had something hard, even cruel and menacing, in it; he felt farther from the accomplishment of his desires. The usual letter from home awoke an even deeper sense of responsibility and of yearning, the extraordinary mingled feelings of desire for freedom from everything and desire to fulfil his duty to the utmost towards those whom he loved and honoured.

Yet his sweet serenity lifted him above any sense of struggle; he was like one waiting for commands.

If M. Amelot did not answer his letter within a day or two, he meant to wait on him personally and force the issue. It must be possible for a noble with talents and energy to obtain, without bribery or intrigue, some honest post in politics. If, however, it was not so, then Luc meant to violently alter his life, to in some way strike directly for what his soul wanted, what it must have.

On the day following the pitiful little adventure with the Countess Koklinska he again saw the graceful cavalier enter the house opposite.

This time a cloak and a low-pulled hat masked the features, but Luc was sure of the remarkably fine and well-set figure; the stranger was, too, just sufficiently above the ordinary stature to be conspicuous anywhere, in any dress.

The man who waited on the chambers happened to be in the room, and Luc remarked to him on the mysterious character of the house opposite.

He was answered that the place was commonly believed to be the residence of one of the fortune-tellers with which Paris swarmed; one of the houses where attempts were made to raise the Devil, to pry into the future; where potions, charms, and maybe poisons were sold; a place of rendezvous also for intrigues that had some reason for concealment, or, in themselves, lacked the element of that mystery that alone made them alluring.

Many great people, even the greatest, the man averred, would go to these places, and take the utmost pains with their disguises—which,

however, very seldom deceived anyone, as all the world knew that all the world went. But the mystery was the great charm, and many adventures appeared palatable when undertaken in a cloak and mask that would have seemed stale enough enacted in broad daylight.

"Of course," finished the fellow, "since La Voisine was burnt in the Place de la Greve, they have been more careful, these people; but nevertheless, Monseigneur, they become very bold, for they say the King himself visits them often enough, and that everybody knows it; and His Highness the Regent encouraged them to a great extent, though they say he never raised the Devil."

Luc smiled; he thought of M. de Richelieu. He wondered if such men had not raised the Devil, in very tangible form indeed, and set him up as master over France.

So it was said that the King spent his leisure with these tawdry prophetesses and cheap tricksters! Since he came to Paris Luc had heard several ends of gossip about the King that, true or not, served to a little blur his vivid picture of the young Louis he was so ardent to serve, whom he *had* served for ten strenuous years without recognition or reward.

It was a frivolous age, a restless age, an age of change, of great possibilities. France was brilliant yet corrupt, energetic yet slothful. Paris did not dazzle so much to Luc's near sight as it had done to his distant gaze. Carola Koklinska became to him as a symbol of the city--so calm, lofty, high, and bright from a distance, so mean, dishonoured, falsely glittering near, yet with an immortal heart concealed somewhere behind the gaudy shams.

Paris was great, was eternal, held the seed of all future thought, was the theatre of all present action; yet her streets were thronged by the

foppish, the foolish, the ignorant, and the starving. Her government was in the hands of men like M. de Richelieu, who in their turn were influenced by women like Carola--greedy soldiers of fortune who kept the point of view of the gutter from whence they came.

Luc's heart swelled to a sense of agony--the agony of powerlessness. All the pageant that passed by him he knew only by glimpses; he was outside, he could do nothing--nay, worse than that, he was even being swept along with the others, no better than they, a mere inarticulate creature played upon by the devices of those he met. Even M. de Richelieu, in his opulent consciencelessness, was expressing, fulfilling himself, turning circumstances into what he wished them to be, making his life what he wanted it; even Carola had forced the hand of Fate to satisfy her sordid ambition; while he was baffled, thwarted, like a thing chained.

He thought of the young man whom he had met in the pavilion at Versailles, and whom he had just seen enter the house opposite. He lulled his slothful soul by juggling with the poor lures of charlatans. He could actually drive his lagging, empty days faster by such spurs as these!

Luc had not yet conceived the task, the responsibility the goal that would satisfy the hunger of *his* soul.

Ill-health, moderate means, an obscure position in the great world--these were his disadvantages. And was it possible that the fire of his desires could not surmount these paltry things?

Where was the secret by which men, poorer, meaner, more hampered than he, had *forced* glory out of their lives, had wrung greatness out of their own souls? He sat with his elbows on the elegant ormolu desk and his face hidden in his hands, shuddering, for his body bent and shivered with the power of the passions that

drove through it. The damp broke out on his forehead, his heart struggled in his side, his hands and feet were cold, his mouth dry, his closed eyes hot in their sockets. He clenched his hands under his face till he felt the bones of the palms with his finger-tips. Reality swung into a dazzling darkness that pulsed before him, out of which he could force nothing tangible but an enigma with the face of Carola. He raised his head at last and sat back in his chair. At these moments his bodily weakness asserted itself, and when he most wished to get beyond and above the flesh he was reminded of it by a cold weight in all his limbs and the heat of the blood in his temples.

He gave a little sigh, then quickly turned his head, seized with an uncontrollable conviction that he was not alone. Yet it was with a considerable start that he saw a slight, strange gentleman standing inside the door keenly observing him.

Luc stared without rising; his visionary mood had scarcely cleared. He gazed eagerly at his visitor in silence. He saw a man no longer young, yet impossible to associate with any idea of age, dressed richly and fashionably in brown velvet that glittered with gold braid, erect, graceful, and of an extraordinary appearance of animation and energy; his face, framed in a grey peruke, was so pale as to be livid; the features were delicate, strongly cut, remarkable; there was an upward slant to eyebrows and nostrils, and the mouth was wide, thin, and smiling, while his brown eyes held a world of passion, power, and force in their glance which was at once challenging, mocking, and good-humoured.

He held an agate-handled cane and his hat under his arm. All the appointments of his person were costly and modish; he wore patches, jewellery, and fine ruffles.

"I have surprised you, M. le Marquis," he observed, with a deepening of his smile and in a voice changeful and melodious.

Luc sprang to his feet; he knew face and figure from a dozen prints, from a hundred descriptions.

"Voltaire!" he cried.

The stranger bowed.

"I am welcome?" he asked.

"I am honoured beyond expression," stammered Luc, with simple and genuine self-abasement.

M. de Voltaire looked sharply at the man who had sent him such remarkable letters, and of whom he had had such a remarkable account from M. de Richelieu.

He was surprised to see one so young, so delicately beautiful, so timid in manner, for Luc stood blushing like a child, and his sensitive features expressed vast confusion. The great man seated himself and threw back his head.

"M. de Richelieu gave me your address," he remarked; "but I did not wait for his company to make the acquaintance of one of whom I have formed such a high opinion."

"Monsieur," answered Luc earnestly, "I fear I have been presumptuous in forcing myself on your notice; but for the interest you have taken in me I am passionately grateful."

M. de Voltaire was secretly, immensely gratified. He had not climbed from an attorney's clerk to be a friend of kings without meeting very severe rebuffs on the way. Even now, courted as he was, the nobles he consorted with reminded him often enough, in covert ways, that he was not 'born.' But here was a Marquis, a soldier, who sincerely

bowed down to him. He had been greatly flattered when he received Luc's first letter; now his vast vanity, quick to take offence, quick to respond to admiration, was even more flattered by the young noble's ardent homage.

And a finer feeling than vanity moved M. de Voltaire's great generous heart; he thought that he saw in this frail, boyish-looking, blushing, slightly awkward soldier a kindred soul.

On his part Luc was struggling with an overwhelming sense of humility in being thus suddenly sought out by the man whom, of all others, he most admired and respected.

"Oh, Monsieur!" he exclaimed, "you cannot guess how much I have hoped to one day meet you."

"A soldier," smiled M. de Voltaire, "and yet you found time for philosophy and the arts!"

Luc, who was standing like a scholar before his master, answered in nervous haste--

"I know nothing about either, Monsieur, nothing--"

The great man interrupted.

"I gather from your letters that you are in quest of glory--therefore you know a great deal about both. If you have the penetration to see, M. le Marquis, that there is nothing in the world like even the dim sparkle of glory--I, at least, can teach you nothing."

As he spoke his eyes flashed as if a positive red fire sparkled from them; so strong was the effect of his presence that Luc felt as if he were being physically touched and held.

M. de Voltaire rose. He had the grand manner consciously--not unconsciously like M. de Richelieu--yet defined from the theatrical by his passionate genius that gave his very flourishes an air of conviction. He stepped up to the Marquis and held out his hand.

"Monseigneur," he said, with a large air of grandeur, "I should like to be your friend."

Luc clasped the thin right hand that had been so active and powerful in the cause of truth and freedom, and tears lent a lustre to his eyes.

"Monsieur," he answered, "I have nothing to offer one like you but my devotion--I have had very few friends--but if you will be troubled with me I will pledge my service to you--always."

M. de Voltaire looked at him thoughtfully.

"You have the spirit," he said--"yes, you have the spirit that is to waken France and re-create her. Do you not feel it, see it everywhere--the dawn of something better than we have ever known?"

He began walking up and down the room, as if his restless heart could not brook his body to stand still.

"What are you going to do with your life?" he asked abruptly.

It was Carola's demand, as Luc instantly remembered with a sense of pain.

"I wish to fulfil myself," he answered. "I can do that by serving France. I am in Paris now, waiting my chance."

M. de Voltaire paused before the high white marble chimney piece.

"In what way are you hoping to serve France?" he asked sharply.

Luc answered with a grave enthusiasm--

"I served in the army ten years, Monsieur, and unfortunately lost my health during the retreat from Prague. It is now my ambition to enter politics."

The powerful eyes of M. de Voltaire narrowed and glittered.

"You know what the politics of France are? You know what kind of a world this Paris is?"

Luc drew a deep breath; he thought of Carola, of M. de Richelieu, of the young suicide of Versailles.

"Monsieur," he replied earnestly, "my life has been passed in a kind of seclusion, I being always with the army and often abroad, and I have had little time even for meditation, and in truth I might well be engulfed in this great world of which I know so little, and where I have already experienced some falls, were it not that I have certain thoughts, ideals so fixed that I cannot conceive them altering, and so I must go on."

"Ah!" cried M. de Voltaire softly, "you will succeed; but not in the way you think perhaps. Politics are poor scope after all."

"Yet you are in them, Monsieur."

"As I was in the Bastille!" flashed M. de Voltaire, "as I have been everything and said everything and deceived them all--all the little dolls who dance to whatever tune is played the loudest. I have been many characters, I have laughed at all France, and now I am--Voltaire! And all France steps to the pace I set--therefore I know something of kings and queens and courtiers and beggars." He

paused and smiled, laying his hand on his heart with a quick, passionate gesture. "I have tried most weapons," he continued, "and the pen is the most powerful of all. Monseigneur, you have thought, you can express yourself--use your pen to lift yourself above the age--write--write from your soul, never heed what you know--write what you feel!"

Luc caught his breath.

"Monsieur--do you mean that I should write and--publish?"

Luc flushed. Instinct, training, tradition were too powerful for even M. de Voltaire's fiery urgings to move. Though he struggled against the impression he felt as if he had been insulted; then he laughed, and the great man before whom he had stood abashed was swept with that laugh on to a different plane. In the next perfectly courteous words that Luc spoke, it was the Marquis addressing the attorney's clerk.

"But, Monsieur, I am a gentleman," he said simply. M. de Voltaire looked at him for a moment of silence. "Would you rather be such as M. de Richelieu or such as I?" he asked at last.

Luc did not see the point.

"M. de Richelieu does nothing that a gentleman may not do," he answered; "he does not write books."

"No--and he has all the seven deadly sins to his credit, which, I suppose, makes a fine patent of nobility," remarked M. de Voltaire slowly.

Luc flushed; he found that it was necessary to explain.

"When one is 'born' there are things one cannot do, Monsieur. I could

no more publish my writings than--" he hesitated for an illustration--
"than a stage player could wear a sword."

M. de Voltaire was very pale; his whole figure trembled.

"Monsieur le Marquis!" he said in a terrible voice, "you have ambitions, you have desires, you have your soul to satisfy, you are searching for glory--I do not doubt that you have in fancy scaled the highest peak of achievement--and all the while you are bound and gagged and tied to earth because you are born a gentleman. Are not your eyes open on the changes about you? Do you not see that we--that I--are sweeping away God and rank and all the barriers that come between man and man? You are young, Monsieur le Marquis; you may live to see the day when kings are cast down and peasants are called to the government of their country. This is the age of light and freedom; your rank is but a clog to you--your genius might raise you to be a light over France!"

He spoke with such force, passion, such energy of gesture and emphasis that Luc had the sense that something new was being violently disclosed to his view. He sank into the chair before the desk and fixed his eyes, dark with emotion, on the extraordinary animated face of the speaker. He had nothing to say; his own instincts, that were until then unquestioned, taken for granted, never put into words, were unchanged, for they were rooted almost as deeply as life itself.

"Go your way," said M. de Voltaire more quietly--"spend your strength for another ten years in politics as you have in war--give your talents to the service of the superstitious young profligate who sleeps on the throne of thrones."

"Monsieur!" cried Luc, "do you speak of the King?"

"Of His Most Christian Majesty," replied M. de Voltaire, "of Louis de

Bourbon, who is always on his knees to a certain Jesus Christ or a certain Marquise de Pompadour, the lady who rules France and who is my very good friend."

"The King is the King," answered Luc, reddening, "and I serve him."

"If you have rejected their Christian God, why do you not reject their Christian King?" demanded M. de Voltaire. "Make your court to the lady I mention; she has great good sense. Use these things, bow down to them, make your way through them, but do not *believe* in them."

"I believe in the King," returned Luc, in a tone of great agitation. "I must believe in him whom I have seen hundreds die for."

"Hundreds of thousands have died for Christ," flashed M. de Voltaire--"do you therefore believe in Him?"

"No," answered Luc; "but I know there is a God, and I love not to talk of these matters. As for His Majesty--if I did not believe in him could I serve him?"

"Serve France," interrupted M. de Voltaire. "Put aside all prejudice, superstition, your rank, your family, come to Paris, go into a garret--be one of us--start as I started--be *free*, express your own soul, write your thoughts, and laugh at the world!"

Luc looked at him with steady hazel eyes, then shook his head.

"I cannot," he said, in firm, positive tones and with a faint smile.

IX. REFLECTIONS

Luc was no more moved from his way by M. de Voltaire's impetuous

entry into his life than he had been by the unveiling of Carola or by the glimpse he had of the frivolous, cynical Court.

M. de Voltaire was alive, vivid, great. Luc admired him almost to adoration for his intellect and his courage, but he did not in the least waver from the plain path he had set himself, nor did the words of the fiery philosopher affect his scheme of life.

He was going along the way prescribed by tradition, by his instinct, by his birth. He was a noble, a soldier; he owed allegiance to the King, respect to his father, reverence to his name and blazon. That he could not believe in the dogma of the Church was no reason for him to disbelieve in loyalty and honour.

Certainly he had wished to be free, but had always rejected the thought as a temptation; and to give up his rank, his family, his noble ambitions to devote himself to literature seemed to him pure sacrilege. He did not even dwell on the suggestion long, but dismissed it as an impossibility.

If the King were nothing in himself--well, he was a symbol, and Luc, with the obstinacy of the idealist, refused to believe that the world was what the caustic vision of M. de Voltaire saw it.

When the first excitement of the great man's visit was over, Luc returned to his old serenity, went to his desk, and wrote another letter to M. Amelot. Whatever the Court was, it was a vehicle. He had never supposed that he could attain his goal without stepping through some mud; there were only two ways open to a man of rank--the army and the Court.

"Unless," thought Luc, "the heavens open to direct me I will tread the way my father trod."

He had parted from M. de Voltaire with friendly courteousness on each side, based on real liking and admiration. Luc had been inspired and the older man piqued by the interview; it had ended on a mutual laugh and a promise of future intercourse. The Marquis in no way abated his homage of M. de Voltaire, who, on his side, had taken a sudden liking for the young soldier.

That evening a letter arrived from Aix. The old Marquis spoke out at last: Would Luc return home and marry Clémence de Sèguy? Her father was more than willing, she was a good girl of rank and qualities, a match for the honour of the house, in every way suitable. Might not he formally request her hand?

Luc put the letter down and set his lips. He had just decided to hug his chains, to be loyal to every tie, to fulfil every duty, to take up the life his ancestors had led--therefore he had no excuse to refuse this match, and Clémence shone brightly beside the tarnished image of Carola. He wrote immediately saying that if he obtained an appointment, or the sure promise of one, he would return to Aix to marry Mile de Sèguy, and as he sealed the letter he felt like a man who has made his own decision irrevocable. The suggestion was not unexpected; but even yesterday he would not have been sure of his answer. Now M. de Voltaire's bold speech had shown him clearly enough his own mind.

Later that day, when his letters were dispatched, he left the house and walked up and down the pleasant quays by the river, possessed by a great sense of peace and exaltation. It had been a day overbrimming with sunshine, and now, in the hour of twilight, there was a soft glow left over water, trees, buildings, and sky--a reflection of light; rosy, clear, tender, and melancholy.

Luc passed by M. de Voltaire's house near the Rue Brèa, and walked slowly on towards the island of the city and the great church

of Notre-Dame de Paris with her two mighty towers. Here the houses began to get poorer and meaner, there were more beggars and fewer sedan-chairs, the shops were more frequent and dirty, the churches looked neglected. Luc paused to lean over the narrow wall of the embankment and look at the great river that widened here to divide into the arms that clasped the island and the church. The water swirled, deep and ruddy coloured from the last glow of the sun, round the piles of the bridge that led to the splendid porch of Notre-Dame; beyond the darkening pile of the church it rolled in a silver-grey flood between flat banks and isolated groups of buildings now beginning to show black against the paling sky.

Luc was lost in deep, sweet, and nameless thoughts when he was roused by the practised whine of beggary loud and insistent in his ear.

He turned to see a creature in the most miserable attire thrusting out a trembling, grasping hand for charity.

Luc started, for the face of this being was so broken, tortured, disfigured (almost beyond likeness to humanity) by the most violent ravages of smallpox that it seemed more some kind of sad-beaten ape than a man.

The monotonous demand for money continued to issue from the bloodless lips; the half-blind eyes winked and peered at Luc with a stifled appeal. The Marquis pulled out his purse and gave the fellow a silver coin in silence, his delicate senses revolted beyond expression at the nearness of the wretched creature. When the beggar, seeing silver for the first time for many months, snatched at Luc's coat in gratitude it was more than he could endure; he drew back sharply against the wall.

"Eh, Monseigneur," mumbled the fellow, crouching away, "pardon

me, and may the good saints bless you."

Luc's tender heart was instantly moved; he regretted that he had been betrayed into an act of pride which had further humbled one so unfortunate.

"God pity you and release you," he said; then he noticed that the beggar had only one leg and dragged himself awkwardly by means of a rude crutch. The fellow saw his benefactor's glance, and with a sudden odd animation in his voice said--

"I lost that in Bohemia, Monsigneur."

"You were a soldier!" exclaimed Luc.

"Yes, Monseigneur--was wounded; then the cold and the smallpox." He dropped into his mumble again; his senses seemed clouded. "There were not many came home at all," he muttered, and hopped off with the coin between his teeth.

Luc stood gazing after him. That pitiful object had perhaps been a gay soldier a couple of years ago. He did not care to follow out his reflections, but abruptly drew his cloak about him and returned to his lodgings.

He found awaiting him a letter from M. Amelot, requesting his attendance at the Louvre on the following day.

X. IN THE LOUVRE

A gorgeous young man, with beautiful dark blue eyes and a face set in lines of gloom and discontent, lounged on a sofa piled with white satin cushions with silver tassels, eating elaborate bonbons out of a gold dish on a small table beside him. The window near looked on to

the river and Paris; it was a private apartment in the Louvre, extravagantly furnished.

By the window stood M. de Richelieu looking often at the river and occasionally at his companion.

"I ask it as a favour," he said.

The other did not trouble to raise his lids.

"Ask M. Amelot," he replied; "I can do nothing."

"You can advise him--make a suggestion."

"I have no influence with him," returned the young man with weary peevishness. "Besides, it is too much trouble."

The sunlight shot a ray between the heavy silk curtains and shone on the speaker's handsome face and disarranged dark hair that flowed over his shoulders .and was only partially powdered.

"You know M. Amelot will do nothing to oblige me," persisted M. de Richelieu; "he is a tiresome fool at best."

The other half raised himself on the couch and turned his superb eyes on the Duke.

"Marèchal," he said with an air of authority, "I am tired of the subject."

"Oh, it is as good a subject as another, sire," returned M. de Richelieu good-humouredly, "and I do not often ask your Majesty for favours."

"No," retorted Louis; "you generally take them."

He yawned, and sighed, and glanced distastefully round the room.

"Come, sire," urged M. de Richelieu, "it is only a few words to M. Amelot."

"I tell you he never takes my advice," answered the King; "and I really know nothing about his business, so I have to be silent when he speaks, which makes our interviews very dull. Besides, I do not like him, and I do not wish to see him."

"Write him a note, then," returned M. de Richelieu, coming from the window.

"Mon Dieu, Marèchal," said Louis peevishly, "I am not sure that I like your protégè either."

"You do not know him, sire," replied the Marèchal, surprised.

"Yes, I do. He wandered into my pavilion at Versailles. I think he is a little insane. Besides," added His Majesty with some touch of animation, "he does not believe in God."

"Neither do I," responded the Duke gaily.

"I know, my dear Marèchal, and it lies on my conscience that I give you my countenance," said the King with a melancholy sigh. "But I pray for you," he added sincerely.

"Your Majesty can pray for M. de Vauvenargues," replied M. de Richelieu.

Louis frowned.

"Do you think I can put up prayers for every heretic and disbeliever in the kingdom? As for your Vauvenargues, why are you so eager to

oblige him?"

The Marèchal lifted his eyebrows and gave a whimsical little smile.

"Because he obliged me once, and I do not wish to be indebted to the fellow."

"You can give him a post in Languedoc," said the King obstinately.

"He will not take it—he must not know that I am behind this—he thinks anything from me would be a bribe."

"Oh, he is one of that type, is he?" said Louis, leaning back on his cushions wearily. "I thought so. Well, I do not like them." He selected another bonbon, then threw it down with disgust.

"Nevertheless," persisted M. de Richelieu calmly, "your Majesty is going to ask M. Amelot to give this young man a post in the next embassy to Madrid."

Louis was silent a moment; his soft, great eyes had a brooding look.

"What does he know about you?" he asked at length with some interest.

"Oh, it is not an amusing story," replied the Marèchal, seating himself at a little desk that stood in a corner and commencing to write.

Louis rose to his full splendid height and crossed to the chimneypiece; his dark blue satins, embroidered with steel, his paste buttons and buckles glittered from the head to the foot of his magnificent person. He yawned, took a spray of jasmine from a black enamel vase, and fastened it into the rich folds of his cravat.

"What are you writing, Marèchal?" he asked, glancing over his

shoulder.

"Your letter to M. Amelot, sire."

"How I dislike people who make me do what I do not want to do," complained the King reflectively.

M. de Richelieu brought the letter and a quill over to the King.

Louis eyed both with distaste.

The Marèchal smiled and waited.

"If I sign, will you help me with La Chateauroux?" asked Louis at length.

M. de Richelieu lifted his shoulder with an expressive gesture.

"What do you want me to do with her?" he demanded, putting letter and pen on the mantelpiece.

"Do with her?" repeated the King impatiently. "Get her into a convent, send her back to her husband, find her another, banish her to the country, promise her anything, as long as you get her out of the palace. The Marquise absolutely refuses to allow her to remain."

"If I make Madame de Chateauroux leave the Louvre peaceably I shall want more than your Majesty's signature to that paper," replied the Marèchal.

"You promised yesterday you would see her for me," protested Louis.

"When I was not sober," said M. de Richelieu; "and afterwards you told her she should stay."

"Well, I was not sober either," responded the King sullenly. "Can you not accuse her of treason and get her into the Bastille? Nothing less will stop her tongue. Get rid of her so that I never see her again, and I will make your Vauvenargues anything you wish."

"Mon Dieu," responded the Marèchal, "your Majesty drives a hard bargain; if Madame la Duchesse was to hear you she would buy us both a potion from the old witch in the Rue du Bac."

Louis shivered.

"I consulted her yesterday," he said, lowering his voice; "she was very vague. I think Madame la Duchesse pays her to deceive me, for she said I had better beware of the Marquise and the atheist who is her friend--that is M. de Voltaire."

The Duke took the now dry quill, redipped it in the ink, and presented it to Louis.

"Sign, sire," he said amiably, "and we will discuss La Chateauroux afterwards."

With an impatient exclamation the King scrawled his signature to the few lines of writing in the Marèchal's beautiful hand.

"That appoints M. de Vauvenargues secretary to the next embassy to Spain," remarked M. de Richelieu, "and is a clear affront to M. Amelot, who has his nephew preparing for the post," he added with malicious levity as he rang the silver and sardonyx hand-bell on the desk.

An usher in white livery instantly appeared. M. de Richelieu gave him the note, folded carelessly across.

"For the Minister of Foreign Affairs," he said.

When they were alone again Louis sighed discontentedly.

"I shall be plagued out of my life," he complained.

"No, sire," replied M. de Richelieu. "I told M. Amelot yesterday to write to this young man and command him to the Louvre to-day, and that your Majesty intended giving him a post."

"Impudent!" cried Louis. "You took all this upon yourself? Really, Marèchal, you might as well be King of France."

"I suppose," replied the Duke, "I should fill the position as well as your Majesty."

"I suppose you would," agreed the King indifferently. "Meanwhile--suggest something to pass the time."

The Marèchal mentioned several amusements, all of which the King languidly rejected.

"Well, then, some business!" exclaimed M. de Richelieu. He snatched up a blue portfolio with gold ribbons and opened it, scattering the papers over the desk. "All these to be read, considered, and signed--M. de Voltaire's instructions on his secret embassy to Berlin--the war--the question about the Chevalier St. George--the Austrian affair--Canada--Flanders--"

"Mon Dieu!" cried Louis impatiently. "How many more?"

"A great many, sire."

Louis cursed his Minister wearily, crossed to the desk, took up the pen, and began signing the documents, one after another, as the

Marèchal, laughing, put them before him.

"I would never have employed this Voltaire," he remarked with an air of distaste, "but the Marquise says he is a great man."

The volatile Duke was soon weary of handing out the papers; he hurried them, signed and unsigned, back into the portfolio.

"It is time for the audience with the new envoy from Russia," he said, glancing at the pale pink marble clock.

Louis cast down his pen and moved away towards the window, from which he could see the dusty gold prospect of Paris, and the tawny glitter of the river, and the flutter of the trees in the palace garden and along the quays.

"Marèchal," he said reflectively, "I am much loved in Paris. Yesterday when I drove out there was the very mob shouting. I think I shall go to the war again," he added--"to Flanders."

"To please Paris, sire?" asked the Marèchal, who, now the King's back was turned, was skilfully abstracting from the portfolio some of the papers which happened to be against the interest of certain friends of his. "Certainly the people like nothing better than a hero."

Louis laughed with a depth of bitterness that was surprisingly in contrast to the almost stupid apathy of his usual demeanour.

"I was well trained to be a hero to please the French," he said. He turned and laid his white right hand, still strong for all its idle slackness, on M. de Richelieu's shoulder. "Come, Marèchal, let us attend our audience."

The Duke closed the portfolio with an air of nonchalance and rose; the King's hand slipped to his arm and rested there on the Duke's

black sleeve that was stiff with coloured sequin embroidery.

The two--the King still leaning on the Marèchal's arm left His Majesty's private apartments for the long galleries of the Louvre.

As M. de Richelieu was lifting the purple curtain from the entrance of the antechamber of the audience room he saw a solitary young man coming down the corridor.

"This is my Vauvenargues," he smiled.

Louis paused, looked back, and, seeing the young man, smiled also.

Luc, grave, alert, serenely glad of his appointment as secretary to the embassy to Madrid which had just been conferred on him by M. Amelot, came on along the gallery, unconscious of the two gentlemen half concealed by the heavy folds of the great velvet curtain until he was just upon them. Then he raised his eyes, to see M. de Richelieu regarding him closely and the tall gentleman with the beautiful face, whose wonderful deep blue eyes were now lit by a kind of amusement. Luc was irresistibly attracted to this face with the loose curls dishevelled round the short, fine features, which he now saw for the first time in broad daylight.

M. de Richelieu realized in an instant that Luc did not know the King.

"I congratulate you on your appointment, M. le Marquis," he said.

Luc uncovered; a flush rose to his brow as a sudden thought stung him.

"Do I owe this appointment to your influence, Marèchal?" he asked.

"No, Monsieur," replied M. de Richelieu, smiling broadly; "to this gentleman's."

Louis' blue eyes flickered over the slim, erect figure of the young noble. He remembered perfectly well his last meeting and all that Luc had said. He was essentially good-humoured, and the present situation diverted him.

"Monseigneur," said the Marquis with dignity, "I have the honour of your acquaintance, not of your name."

He waited with his hat in his hand and the colour deepening in his face, for he felt acutely that the Marèchal was laughing at him.

"I do not know to whom I am indebted," he added.

"Monsieur," answered Louis, "to the King of France."

"His Majesty!" stammered Luc, bewildered.

"I am the King," smiled Louis with a lazy, soft grandeur.

Luc's quick mind saw it all in a flash of pain--his first sight of this man, their meeting, the unplaceable manner, his own foolish, impetuous words. He rallied to the shock as he had rallied to many a cavalry charge; he faced the blue eyes unflinchingly, though his face became as colourless as the soft folds of muslin under his black velvet stock.

"I stand at your Majesty's mercy," he said, in a faint but even voice.

"You remember our meeting, Monsieur?" asked Louis. "Yes, sire."

Louis advanced a step. Luc did not lower his eyes; the two men looked at each other with a steady intentness.

"You spoke of the King of France," said Louis, "and you gave him

too many virtues, Monsieur. It is a rare fault, for the King has more detractors than defenders. I hope you may keep your loyalty in your new employment." He smiled a little sadly, and the blue eyes clouded and flashed.

Luc was disarmed; the languid young idler was transformed into the man who might indeed be the King of his imaginings—a man who was too great to be affronted, too noble to remember trivialities. Luc was aware of nothing in that moment but a passionate desire to serve the King—to instantly prove his loyalty; the generous blood surged back into his face.

"Your Majesty will have no idle servant in me," he said, and his voice quivered a little now.

Louis held out his large, shapely hand.

"Sire!" cried Luc, overwhelmed. He sank on one knee and kissed the King's fingers with throbbing lips.

"We hope to see you on your return from Spain," said Louis as he rose.

"Your Majesty!" murmured Luc. He took his dismissal with a dignity above a courtier's and stepped backwards, bowing low.

Louis was silent for a little after Luc had gone, but M. de Richelieu laughed, as if he were in possession of a delicious jest.

"What is the matter, Maréchal?" asked Louis at length, turning sleepy eyes on him.

"I was thinking that, after all, your Majesty does it better than I could."

Louis gave him a sideways glance, revealing, it seemed, that he was

not so unconscious of his own arts as he appeared to be.

"Ah," he answered languidly. "I did not like the fellow," he added thoughtfully; "he has a bright look of death. I hope he will not come back." With a sudden shudder he continued, "keep these dying men away from me, Richelieu!"

"Dying?" echoed the Marèchal, startled. "Why, he is well enough--La Koklinska was in love with him last week."

"All the same, I do not think he has long to live," replied the King gloomily.

A sound of voices and the tap of high-heeled shoes came from the end of the corridor.

Louis turned his beautiful face with a startled movement. "Mon Dieu," he cried, angry and paling, "it is Madame de Chateauroux!"

He caught M. de Richelieu by the arm and drew him sharply into the audience chamber.

XI. THE FETE

A honey-coloured haze of autumn glory hung over the trees and fields outside Aix, where a fete was being held, this perfect day in late October. Among the crowds who wandered in and out of the trees, the booths, the stalls were Luc de Clapiers and his promised wife, Clèmence de Sèguy. He had returned home for his betrothal and to prepare for the appointment he was to take up in the spring. His prospects were suddenly pure gold to him; the sense of the opportunity ahead, of the achievement within his grasp, of success, of fulfilment mingled with the joy of pleasing his father, of satisfying all those claims of family affection and family pride, which had so often

seemed a chain and a clog, into one ecstasy of living that was crowned by the gentle passion and happy devotion of Clémence, who seemed to have no wish in the world but to shine for him. Her soft youth, her grave ignorance, her pretty follies and lofty ideals of constancy, self-sacrifice, and truth won from him a tender respect and a generous gratitude that seemed to her perfect love. When she was absent from him he did not often think of her. She filled her place in his mind as his promised wife; over his soul she had no dominion.

They paused before a stage in front of a tent set among a group of elm trees. A little group of townsfolk in their best clothes were watching a marionette show that was nearly concluded. Above the tent fluttered long red pennons against the blue sky and gold leaves; the stage was hung at the back with white curtains and in front with a striped tapestry of many colours, on the edge of which, where it trailed in the golden dust, a man in green velvet with a comical painted face sat beating a scarlet drum.

From the back of the tent sounded a brisk, lively music, to which the puppets danced a *finale*, fluttering their laces and spangles.

Clémence laughed instinctively and laid her hand on Luc's sleeve.

"Is it not beautiful?" she said. She had never been out of Aix in her life, and never to a fair before: she was only eighteen.

The marionettes disappeared, and a little girl not above six years old sprang on to the stage with a coil of rope in her hand.

"I should like to stay," said Clémence.

There was a thin semicircle of seats about the stage; at one end of this, in the front, they seated themselves.

The small performer deftly fastened the rope from one end to the other of the stage, about five feet from the ground, and commenced walking across it. She wore an apple-green coloured bodice and a white skirt with a red frill; she had a small, dark face, and frowned down at the rope with her arms spread wide and her body swaying.

Clémence leant forward and watched with grave absorption. Luc looked at her, studied her with covert intensity, which she was too occupied with the performance to notice.

Her face was slightly flushed, the lips parted, the absorbed eyes shaded by the brim of her straw hat; between her warm-coloured, fine neck and the frilled cambric of her fichu rolled a cluster of brown curls that caught the sunlight in threads of gold; her small and helpless-looking hands, covered in fine black silk mittens, were folded in her lap; the full folds of her pale violet silk gown fell over the chair and touched the dust.

Luc marvelled at her, That adorable little face had never expressed sorrow, weariness, depression, anger, or any sad passion; it was untouched by yearning, longing--by any struggle; it was, save for the full development of its beauty, the face of an infant; and yet she had calmly pledged herself to the stormy virtues of constancy, self-abnegation, self-sacrifice, unending fidelity--more than he had ever asked of her.

"I used to consider her a child," thought Luc; "but she is nearer an angel." Then he forgot the stage under the trees, the passing holiday-makers, and even the near presence of his betrothed, and was only aware of the sunshine, which carried him back to Paris and the Pont Neuf--and the river flowing past the Louvre and the isle of the city (always the river ran through all his dreams and visions)--and the Rue du Bac at night with the street lights gleaming through the rain--and then the sunshine again over the poplar trees on the quays and the

spires of the churches.

He thought, too, of M. de Voltaire, and how that great man would smile to think that he, Luc, was supremely happy in the prospect of his modest appointment and his simple wife.

A timid touch on his sleeve roused him. Clémence was gazing at him with shining eyes.

"Is it not wonderful?" she whispered.

Luc glanced at the stage; the child had raised herself by one hand on the rope upright into the air, her feet close together, her green tights a vivid line of colour, and her white and crimson skirts a ruffle round her waist.

A man came from the back of the stage and caught the child in his arms; he wore a robe of loose pattern composed of squares of black and white, and he began to execute a fantastic dance with the child on his shoulder.

The man in green velvet left off beating the drum, and began collecting from the crowd in a pink and gold shaded shell.

Luc's gaze wandered from the performers, and he watched the mummer's extravagant bows and grimaces as he solicited his guerdon from the spectators.

Presently he stopped before a lady who stood in the shade under one of the elm trees, and who was remarkable both for a certain air of the great world not common to the nobility of Aix, and for the fact that she was alone with only a black page in attendance. Luc could not see her face, for she wore a heavy-plumed beaver, and her figure was disguised by a scarlet riding-cloak, yet she interested him by reason of an extraordinary mixture of humility and defiance in her air.

conveyed by something in her pose, the droop of her shoulders, and the set of her head.

She gave the player a coin, and he passed on; she remained under the tree, a conspicuous figure, and one of a mournfulness out of place in this time of carnival.

Several people looked at her; some stopped to stare.

Luc wondered who she was, why she was here alone and apart from the general gaiety.

He was looking at her when she came slowly out of the shadow, her page behind her, and as she moved into the sunlight Luc recognized Carola Koklinska.

"The show is over," said Clémence regretfully.

A gaudy painted curtain had been drawn across the little stage, and the people were moving away to other booths. "Shall we go?" asked Luc.

"Yes; it is rather cold," she answered shyly. She rose from the little green chair, and as she turned Carola, walking in front of the poles and canvas, was full in her vision.

Carola looked over her shoulder and saw the girl; the two gazed directly at each other.

"Who is that lady?" asked Clémence, for she saw Luc's salutation and the stranger's faint, answering smile.

"A Polish Countess," he answered, "whom I met in Prague and in Paris."

"Why, what is she here for--alone?" questioned Mademoiselle de Sèguy. "And will you not present me to her?" Her ardent desire to be gracious to any acquaintance of his showed in her eager words.

Luc smiled.

"I never knew her well enough," he said, "and it seems she does not wish to speak to me."

Certainly Carola, without a backward look, had disappeared in the crowd. Clèmence seemed disappointed.

"I wish she had stayed," she remarked sincerely.

Luc made no answer; he was wondering what had brought Carola to Aix. He had thought that she was still in Austria; he supposed she might be on her way to Avignon; yet he knew M. de Richelieu was in Paris, and under any circumstances it seemed curious that she should be alone at a public fete--she who had always affected such magnificence.

A little sigh from Clèmence recalled him from his momentary reflection.

"It is cold," she repeated timidly.

"Come out into the sun," he answered, and they moved slowly away from the crowd, beyond the elms, and so beyond the fete, into a little slope of meadow land where the grass was yet untrod and green. The western distance, blue, hazed, and mysterious, was half hid by a belt of beech trees, whose boughs bent beneath a load of tawny, orange, gold, and crimson leaves.

The distant, mechanical music of the fete was in the air, 'and occasional gusts of laughter and of applause broke the monotonous

rhythm of the melody.

Luc and Clémence moved farther and farther away from these sounds; the streaming sunlight wrapped them in warmth and glory, the beech trees were a dazzle of golden colour before their eyes, and the sky overhead was clear blue without a trace of cloud. The girl sighed, looked at the trees, the heavens, then at the ground.

"Are you sad, my dear?" asked Luc very tenderly.

"No," she answered in a thin voice; "only I should like to do--something--for you."

"For me?" His face flashed into a charming smile.

"Yes." She lifted her childlike countenance and her voice was stronger. "Sometimes I wish that you were poor or lonely or--despised--that I might prove what I can only say now."

He was abashed and overwhelmed. He saw tears of sincerity glittering on her long, drooping lashes; the heroic in his own soul was quick to salute the heroic rising to him in hers.

He stopped and turned to face her.

"You must not say that," he said, taking her by the shoulders very gently. "I do not deserve that you should say that, Clémence."

She shuddered and bent her head lower.

"I am such an ordinary woman--but now I feel I could do something great--for you. I--I cared for you before you ever thought of me, you know. When you were in Paris--I used--to--pray--every night--that you might come back."

She gave a quivering little laugh. He looked at her with intense earnestness, and the blood flushed into his face.

"You will have my life's entire homage, Clémence," he responded gravely "To have you for my wife is beyond my desert. I want you to do nothing for me but be yourself and smile on my endeavours to please you."

He took his hands lightly from her shoulders, and she clung weakly and gently to his arm.

"You do believe I would do anything in the world for you?" she said in a kind of broken passion. "Oh, I feel so foolish, so ignorant--and you have a great career before you. But if I ever have a chance--"

"What makes you speak like this?" he asked in a tone of reverent wonder. "I have done nothing for you--"

"Oh, oh!" she murmured, as if she concealed a secret pain. "You do not understand me. But if you are ever in any misfortune--"

"You are the sweetest child in the world," Luc interrupted, "and you must not think of misfortune--I trust never to bring you within the shadow of any trouble."

She gave a little fluttering sigh and slipped her arm from his. They reached a low fence that separated the meadow from the beech trees and there they rested, looking, through a break in the ruddy foliage, at the sweet expanse of open country.

Luc's heart was singing within him. All sense of struggle, of discord, of loneliness, of hopes deferred, of ambitions cheated was over; the road was open, free. He would tread it in the old ways of honour and nobility; he would fulfil himself, and at the same time respect his name, his blazon, and the traditions of his race. His companion was

beside him and prepared to follow him with more than conventional affection, while he experienced a new and exquisite pleasure in offering her all the devotion of a hitherto untouched heart. In truth it seemed to Luc, as he gazed over the prospect of Provence, that here, in his native place, among his own people, he had found the peace he had looked for uselessly abroad; here, in simple Clémence, were the high virtues he had once thrilled to think he had met in Carola Koklinska.

The sun glowed to its setting; superb bars of purple and scarlet began to burn out of the dense gold of the west; a low, clear breeze arose and swept over the grass.

Clémence broke the charmed silence.

"Are you sure of me?" she asked with panting force.

He gave her a quick smile; the glamour of all his visions and hopes transfigured the moment.

"As I am sure of God," he said. He raised the cold, mitted hand from the fence and kissed it.

"Ah, Luc," she said below her breath, "Luc!"

They went slowly back towards the fete with the sun behind them and their shadows long across the grass before them, and all the air circled with glory and the ineffable light of the setting sun.

As they entered the grounds of the fair they met the old Marquis and Joseph.

If Luc had needed any completion of his happiness he would have found it in the radiant demeanour of his father, whose every wish had been now fulfilled and satisfied. He did not know of Luc's

correspondence with M. de Voltaire; in Aix, Luc attended Mass, and never mentioned the new philosophy that guided Paris. There was nothing to trouble the elder M. de Vauvenargues's touching pleasure in his sons.

Coloured lamps began to appear in the trees, mingling their twinkling beams with the sanguine fires of the sun, and music sounded with renewed gaiety from the gaudy tents.

Luc de Clapiers was content.

XII. AFTERWARDS

The last generous glow of October had passed into the first chill of November; the white haze of an early frost lay over the fields as Luc, but a few days after the fete, rode across the fields where he had walked with Clémence on his way home from the house of the Comte de Sèguy.

He noted, even in his happy mood, a certain sadness in the deserted spot that had been so gay. The fair was over, the travelling players had gone, leaving behind them worn grass, scattered rubbish, and trampled bushes; in one corner of the field a ragged tent still stood with a long blue and scarlet streamer fluttering above it. Luc wondered at 'that, for there was no indication of anyone having been left behind; but he rode on briskly towards the gates of Aix, and was striking out of the fields into the high road when round the group of elms, where the stage had been but so short a time before, rode Carola Koklinska.

It seemed as if she would have passed him without a word, but he drew rein, and then she checked her horse also. "You wonder to see me in Aix," she said.

It was sunless and near to twilight. She wore a dark dress and hat, and in her whole person was no colour whatever; her face was pallid, and the blood only showed faintly in her lips; her mount was a fine white horse--an animal such as she had ridden when she came round the silver firs in Bohemia.

"Certainly; I thought you were in Austria, Madame," said Luc with a grave smile.

She looked at him steadily through the cold, uncertain light.

"I have been a failure in Austria," she answered. "Perhaps you have not heard, Monsieur, that I have been a failure altogether."

"No," said the Marquis; "I have heard nothing of you. I was surprised to see you the other day--here, at the fete."

"I came," she replied, still gazing at him, "because I shall not be likely to ever hear music or see gaiety again--not even this little simple country merry-making."

The wind blew sharply between them and a few dead leaves fell from the elm on to Carola's lap.

"Is M. de Richelieu in Paris?" asked Luc.

"M. de Richelieu"--she spoke without heat or bitterness--"is now the servant of Madame de la Popliniere, and M. Amelot, who was my friend, has fallen. The Marquise de Pompadour has changed the face of the Court; every post is now filled by her creatures. Besides, I was very stupid in Austria--I was found out."

Her horse shook his head and the bridle silver twinkled in the stillness.

Luc asked her what she had once asked him--

"What are you going to do with your life?"

"I have made my choice." Her answer was ready. "M. de Richelieu is generous--he gives one--alternatives. I have an estate in Poland, my husband's estate. I could go there, with a pension--I could die--like Madame de Chateauroux--I could go into a convent. I have decided on the last."

"Why?" asked Luc, leaning a little forward on his saddle.

"Because I am tired." Her dark, heavy-lidded eyes were still clear and steady. "You must not think that I am more holy than I ever was. I have simply done what I meant to--come to the usual end--and I am tired."

"Will your religion console you for the loss of the world?" smiled Luc.

"Yes," she answered swiftly. "Do you remember me in the chapel of St. Wenceslas? I *believe*."

"Are you putting this resolve in practice--at once?" She answered in her old precise tones.

"I am journeying to a convent near Avignon which is under a certain obligation to me. I was generous to them and they will be generous to me."

"Alone?" asked Luc gently. "You are travelling alone?"

She smiled.

"I had my page. He left me yesterday with most of my jewels. Yes, I am alone. As you may remember, Monsieur, I am not afraid--of such

things as travelling alone."

He did remember her in Bohemia, and a glow came into his heart.

"I think you have a fine courage, Madame."

"Yes?" she assented indifferently. "There are so many kinds of courage, are there not? I," she added, "have been cowardly enough in some things."

Luc sat silent, looking down at the dark mane of his patient horse.

"You are to have your chance in the spring," continued Carola. "I am glad--and about Mademoiselle de Sèguy. In great sincerity I congratulate you. I believe and hope this lady will not disappoint you."

"I believe so also, Madame," said Luc proudly. Carola sighed.

"I am leaving Aix to-night," she said. "Good-bye, Monsieur le Marquis."

Luc took off his hat.

"Good-bye, Madame. I shall still think of our journey to Eger as an--inspiration."

"Thank you," answered Carola.

She touched up her horse; and so it seemed that they were about to part for ever, he journeying towards the dark gates of the town and his brilliant future, she towards her convent and her obscure end. So they would have parted had not a sudden sound checked them, made them pause, drawn them once more together.

It was the imploring, weak wail of a child rising out of the empty dusk.

They both listened, and it was repeated.

"O God!" cried Carola, with sudden passion. "I have heard that cry in dreams!"

"Some child is lost," said Luc.

"And in pain," she added quickly.

He turned his horse's head, and went back with her along the way he had come, across the worn grass of the fair ground, which was strewn with confetti, torn paper, and ragged muslin roses.

The crying continued. It sounded near, yet very feeble; it could scarcely rise above the sound of the horses' hoofs or the jingle of the harness.

The twilight seemed to have descended very rapidly; it was now almost dark, but the clouds were breaking above a rising moon, and the last glow of daylight was mingled with a cold, unearthly radiance. Luc felt chilly even beneath his riding mantle; the memory of the march from Prague seemed to linger in the faintly bitter air.

Carola paused and looked over her shoulder at the man, who was a little behind her.

"Stop," she said. "You had better ride home, Monsieur."

"What do you mean?"

"Have you not heard about the plague?"

"The plague?"

"The smallpox," she said intensely. "They say it will be bad in

Provence this winter. They wish to keep it from the towns. I was told, at my inn, that they suspected it among the players, and had ordered them away suddenly."

"Well?" questioned Luc keenly.

Carola pointed her whip towards the corner of the field where the solitary tent stood.

"The crying comes from there," she said. "They have left somebody behind."

"Ah!" cried Luc, "some one infected--some one ill!"

"I think so--at least it is possible."

Luc had heard of such things often enough. The smallpox was the dread and the scourge of the country; his father had earned recognition from the Court by his heroic fight with an epidemic in Aix many years ago. Luc had heard him speak of how the sick and dying had been cast out by their own kin.

"I will see if there is anyone abandoned in the tent," he said.

Carola laid her hand on his bridle.

"No," she cried, with energy. "Return home, Monsieur. You have others to think of--remember, reflect. You must not risk it."

Luc smiled.

"Am I to watch you go--and then ride away?"

"Ah," she answered, "what does it matter about me? There is a *maison de Dieu* at my convent; the nuns would take in the sick."

"Madame, simply because there may be some danger, I cannot leave you."

"You have never had the smallpox?"

"No."

"Then," she said, in great agitation, "you must not come. Think of Mademoiselle de Sèguy."

"She would bid me go," smiled Luc. "And we make much out of nothing-maybe it is not the plague."

He took her hand gently from his reins and rode across to the tent.

By the time he had dismounted and fastened his horse to a little broken elm tree she was on foot also and beside him, leading her horse.

"If you were to ride into the town, could you not find some one who would come?" she asked.

"Many," he answered; "but why should I? This has come my way. Do *you* ride on, Madame."

"O God!" cried Carola desperately, "supposing it *is* the plague?"

Luc lifted the tent flap and entered. The air was heavy and foul; it was completely dark. Luc stepped cautiously; he could hear nothing.

He began to think Carola had been mistaken, and that the tent was empty, when she appeared behind him with the lantern from her saddle, lit, in her hand. The beautiful beams disclosed the sagging canvas, the tipping centre pole, a confusion of articles, clothes,

cooking utensils, stools, and paper hats and crowns cast over the ground.

Carola held the lantern higher.

In one corner a child lay along a pile of garments, staring at the light with glazed eyes; her face was white and disfigured with purple stains like bruises, her lips were covered with blood. Seeing these two looking at her, she began to wail incoherently.

Both Luc and Carola recognized her by her apple-green bodice and red and white skirts: she was the little dancer on the tight-rope at the fete.

Luc made a step forward, but Carola caught his arm.

"*It is* the smallpox!" she whispered. "What are we going to do?"

Luc looked at her.

"You should not be here," he said.

The child began to talk in some kind of patois.

"She is saying her prayers," said Luc, who knew the dialect of the district. He shook his arm free from Carola, went to the humble bed, and took the small, cold, heavy hand of the sick child in his. "What is the matter, eh?" he asked, in a tone of great tenderness. "You are not alone now."

"You have done a mad thing," said Carola, in a quivering voice. "You cannot return to Aix now."

He lifted his calm, beautiful face, round which the soft locks of hazel hair had loosened.

"No," he said, very gravely--"not until I know if this is the smallpox or not."

He put his arm round the child, and, taking his laced handkerchief from his pocket, wiped the blood from the sore lips. The little creature drooped her swollen face against the silk muslin and lace on his bosom.

Carola set the lantern on a stool and looked round the tent.

"Here is nothing," she said. "What can we do." Luc looked up.

"Your convent, Madame. You say they would take in the sick?"

"Yes--that is our only chance to save the child."

"And to avoid Aix," added the Marquis quietly. "How far is this convent?"

"Twenty miles, perhaps."

She came to the other side of the couch and knelt down.

"Give *me* the child," she said passionately. "You do not know what you are doing--what it means. For God's sake--!"

"Hush," answered Luc gently. "I know very well--hush."

The little girl lay in a stupor in his arms; as the blood came to her mouth he wiped it away. His face was utterly pale, but serene; he was thinking of Clémence and the beggar on the Paris quay.

Carola looked at him, and controlled herself with an effort.

"You sacrifice so much," she said, in a very low voice; "I nothing. You

were wrong not to let me undertake this."

"Could you have carried her?" he asked, with a little smile.

And to both of them came the thought of the child she had borne over the Bohemian mountains.

"That was younger," she murmured.

And in the strangeness of their being alone again with the dying, isolated alone again from the world, they looked at each other in silence.

"What shall I do?" whispered Carola.

"We will go to your convent. I think the moon will hold. There is no other way, and perhaps we may prevent the plague spreading to Aix. All this"--he looked round the tent--"must be burnt." He rose from his knees, lifting the child, who cried bitterly when her aching body was moved.

"We will go at once," he said, with his simple air of decision. "Some one might find us here."

Two slender figures in their long dark cloaks, they left the tent--he carrying the child, she the lantern. When they breathed the clear air again both gave a deep sigh of relief.

It was now dark, but the moon was abroad though swimming behind a feeble veil of clouds; the cold was insidious, keen, mysterious; the grey and silver sky seemed very remote, the trees still as a painted fantasy; the little wind had utterly died away. Luc's face was a pale oval above the mantle that wrapt his burden, which he carried easily enough for all his slight look.

Carola glanced at him and bit her lower lip.

"It is going to be a cold night," she said. She went back into the tent and brought out a woollen cloak, a tawdry striped thing of blue and yellow. "Wrap her in this, Monsieur."

Luc gave up the child, who coughed and muttered deliriously, between them they rolled her in the player's mantle. Luc wiped her face and her lips with his stained handkerchief.

Both were silent now; like creatures in the grip of fate, they seemed to act almost mechanically.

Leaving the child under the trees, they collected the paper roses, the card-board hats and crowns, and piling them together in front of the tent, lit them from a ragged brand of paper turned into a torch by the lantern flame.

The first attempts were fruitless, but presently the muslin began to flare and the fire rose up strong and clear.

Luc and Carola stepped back; the ragged edges of the tent caught; in a few moments a fantastic bonfire lit the dark and lonely field, and illuminated the steadfast faces of the man and woman who watched their work. When the flames were sweeping untroubled over the infected spot, the two, still without a word, turned to their horses. When they had unfastened them, Luc spoke.

"Can you lift her up if I mount?" he asked.

"I will try."

He carried the child to his horse's side, then gave her to Carola as he sprang into the saddle; then as he stooped to her, Carola felt his bare cold hands touch hers as the little girl, not without difficulty, was

lifted on to his saddle-bow.

"You know the way; you must lead," he said.

She stood for a second, looking up at him. The glow of the fire brought out every line of his face, so fine and true and serene, and yet the face of a man who knew what he had undertaken, what was before him, for there was a kind of awe in his expression, and yet an exaltation; his lips were delicately compressed, his nostrils delicately distended, and his eyes were wild and dark. He was looking over the huddled form of the child in front of him that he held to his bosom with his right hand; his gaze went beyond Carola and beyond the flames. She thought he had forgotten she was there.

She mounted and brought her horse alongside his. "Ah, Madame," he murmured, with a start.

They rode together out of the light of the flames.

XIII. CLEMENCE

The lantern failed, and the moonlight was often obscured, or completely blotted out by the passing sullen clouds.

Luc's right arm was stiff about the heavy child and his left hand cold on the bridle; his very blood was chill. It seemed to him that the creeping bitterness of the night was more intense than all the hurricane snows of Bohemia. He seldom moved his head, and his body was cramped in one position with the weight of the little girl against it; but his mind had never been clearer, more alert, more active.

Picture after picture flashed before him with agonizing vividness--all that had gone to make his life since his return from Bohemia to his

last parting, a few hours ago, with Clémence in her father's house formed and faded with mechanical repetition, and against the background of their visionary memories raced his thoughts.

It came to this: a little while ago he had been happy with the ecstatic happiness of youth--of proud, ambitious youth; he had seen honourable labour behind, honourable labour ahead; he had felt love rest against his heart, and seen glory hovering very near. And now--he was riding through the dark, with disease, corruption, perhaps death, in his arms; riding away from the home to which he had lately pledged himself, away from Clémence and all she stood for--with a woman associated with humiliation and sadness for his companion--with great chances that he would never be able to turn back again to those things he had left behind.

Yet he was conscious all the time of the highest exaltation perhaps that he had ever known--an intermittent sensation, now weaker, now stronger, that, however, held his heart up steadily.

The night seemed endless. Only once did they meet anyone--some peasants in a cart, who stopped and seemed to wonder at them.

"We carry the plague!" cried Carola as they galloped past, and they heard the men's cries of terror and supplications to God.

The child began to stir in Luc's arms. He himself felt faint; the night wind brought on his cough, which had troubled him since his last campaign. He tried to comfort the little girl; she became still again, and, he thought, heavier.

He turned to Carola beside him; since they started she had not spoken to him.

"It must be near the dawn," he said.

"I do not know," she answered, and added, after a little, "Are we not off the road? I think we have lost the way."

The moon was setting. Luc had been dwelling so in his thoughts that he had not noticed through what growing blackness they were riding. A wind was up, and they could hear it shaking some trees near with a deep rustling sound.

"Poplar trees," came Carola's voice; and he thought, as he knew she thought, of the poplar trees in the garden off the Rue Deauville.

They drew rein; he had no light whatever, and her lantern had gone out.

"We must wait for the dawn," said Carola again. "I cannot find the way. The dawn must be soon now, I think."

He heard her dismount and sigh.

"This is grass--a field," she continued. "We have left the road. How is the child?"

He turned back the woollen cloak that was damp with dew and delicately touched the small face in the hollow of his arm.

"Very cold," he answered. "Ah!"

"What is it?" asked Carola.

"Her eyes are wide open and her mouth, but she does not move."

"Dead?" asked Carola.

"I think--dead."

He moved his cramped arm from under his burden and laid her across his shoulder while he dismounted; out of the dark came Carola's hand and touched his arm, then her other hand, and took the child from him.

"We must let the horses go," he said. "It is raining. Perhaps we could find some shelter."

Carola's voice came faintly, as if it was a long way off. "The child is dead. I cannot feel her heart at all. What soft hair she has!"

Luc heard the jingle of harness as the horses moved away. The rain fell with a cold sting on his bare hands, his blood was frozen, his limbs stiff; the darkness lay like a weight on his eyes.

"We must wait here for the light," he said.

He heard Carola move.

"Yes, we will wait," she answered. "Perhaps we had better have stayed in the tent--yet what chance had she there? Oh, my dear, my poor dear!" and he heard her kiss the little tight-rope dancer.

"Give me your hand," he said; "we might find the trees." He turned to where he thought she was, and presently felt her hand again, ungloved, in his. With his right hand flung before him, he discovered the long narrow trunks of the trees.

"Here!" he called to his companion. She withdrew her hand from his; he guessed that she was still carrying the child. There was a little pause, then he heard her cast herself on the ground.

"O God, believe that I am tired, tired!" she cried out.

Luc leant against the tree-trunk, gazing across the blackness. For the

second time they were alone together in the cold and dark with a dead child between them; it seemed to him a symbol of what separated them and yet what brought them together: death and sorrow--but endeavour and exaltation. The enigma that had seemed to have poorly solved itself in the house of M. de Richelieu was now suddenly again unsolvable. Was she not brave and kind?--what she had appeared in Bohemia--had not all his estimates been utterly wrong? And what was the meaning of this constant crossing of their lives--connected always with death?

He put his hand wearily to his forehead; her voice came up from the ground, near his feet.

"These fields are not new to me, Monsieur de Vauvenargues. I have slept under these trees before. I used to watch the sheep here when I was a little ragged child. Sometimes I used to go to Aix with milk, and see you, Monsieur le Marquis, riding with your brother. Then I had another name--it was before I went to Paris."

"So you are from Provence?" he murmured.

"Yes. Here I was born, homeless, nameless; and here I shall die, homeless, nameless also. I have done what I wished to, and I regret nothing."

Luc could not speak; that their lives should have been so twisted together strangely troubled him.

She seemed to divine his silence.

"I could not help this. For Mademoiselle de Seguy's sake, I would have done anything it had not happened."

The rosy face of Clémence with her devoted eyes sprang out of the blackness to confront Luc; he shivered and put his hands over his

forehead.

"Why do you not speak?" came the weak voice from his feet. "Are you thinking of the future?"

"Yes," said Luc, with an effort.

He felt that she shuddered.

"Are you--afraid?" she asked, in a tone of horror.

"Yes," said Luc simply.

The terror of that admission filled the darkness.

Luc set his back against the tree. He could feel the fine rain on his hands and dripping from his hat; he coughed and shivered.

"In Bohemia we were on the heights," came Carola's voice; "but this is the lowlands, and there is not one star."

Luc was thinking again of Paris, and the river, and the beggar on the quay, and of Clémence as she had stood in her father's hall to say good-bye to him with soft lamplight over her face that seemed to express something never to be put into words, and her gown, lace, perfume, and pale colours.

"Speak, Monsieur le Marquis, speak!" the woman's voice implored. "I am here with a dead child."

"She *is* dead, then?" asked Luc.

"I cannot warm her or make her move." The answer was unsteady and wistful. "Yes, she is dead."

Luc was thinking now of his home, of his family waiting for him, of their wonder at his absence. He recalled the work he had meant to do to-night and the letters he had intended to write. He was now as cut off from that as if he had been swept to another world.

A sob came shivering up to him; he started with a sense of his great selfishness.

"Rise up, Madame," he said; "rise up. Take my hand, and stand beside me. It has happened that those brought as near contagion as you are have escaped."

She did not answer.

"And it may not be the smallpox," added Luc, against his own deep conviction.

This time she answered.

"I know it is. We are infected, perhaps doomed. As for me, it is no matter; but you--your future?"

Luc made no reply; darkness lay on his brain as well as before his eyes. He felt his strength, almost his life, being drawn from him by the chill and the damp; it seemed worse than the snows of Bohemia. He realized how weak he had been since his illness at Eger; how even the burden of a child and the cold of a night in one of his native fields was almost beyond his endurance.

He turned towards the spot where Carola must be still seated.

"You are cold, Madame? Take my cloak--I am warm enough."

"No--no!" she said sharply. "I have my own, and I have often slept out in an old thin shawl--I should be used to it."

"And I," answered Luc sadly--"I who was a soldier." He was unclasping his cloak with numb fingers when he heard her rise to her feet; she touched his shoulder.

"I am warm," she said.

Her hand trembled down his arm, found his hand and held it. He let her clasp it between hers, which were, as she said, warm. The touch of her soft palms caused a wave of mingled anguish and pleasure to rise to his heart. She came closer; he felt her heavy cloak sweep his foot; the faint Eastern perfume he always associated with her crept into his nostrils; his head sunk slightly on his chest, and he shivered.

She drew his cold hand to her bosom. He felt, with a quickening of all his senses, the stiff smoothness of her satin gown, the straining of her breast against the silk cords, and even the hasty beating of her heart. She raised his hand, and he felt her throat, her chin, and finally her lips.

A soft and timid kiss was lightly pressed on his fingers--the kiss of a suppliant, of one who asks for mercy.

Then she brought his slack hand down to her bosom again.

"You are very cold, Monsieur," she said; her voice was infinitely sad.

Luc saw her as a humble peasant girl with black hair hanging about her shoulders and bare feet. The great lady had disappeared; he thought only of the girl she had described, keeping sheep in the fields and sleeping under the trees. His brain was numb, and fantasy dazed him. He put out his free hand and caught her shoulder; though he felt the rich velvet of her cloak, he still imagined her as the poor peasant orphan.

She came closer; he felt her breath, and knew her face was very near his. She loosened his hand, and he raised it to her other shoulder. He felt velvet, hard embroidery, and the rise and fall of her breath shaking her frame under his delicate grasp.

"I think the dawn is breaking," he said. "You and I are strange company to watch the sun rise."

And he laughed under his breath.

The brim of her hat touched his beaver as she sharply turned her head.

"My God, yes, the dawn!" she murmured. She drew away from him altogether. They were facing east, it seemed, for the sky before them was a watery grey, faint, faint and melancholy; a blue of misty silver, a mere promise of light. Slowly the shapes of things began to form out of the darkness; a pallid glow overspread the heavens; the rain ceased.

Luc never moved. He put his hand before his eyes; in his ears was the rustle of the poplar leaves, sounding very far away. A deeper chill seemed to seize his limbs, to penetrate to his very heart, which was beating faintly, reluctantly, and with a certain sense of pain.

He made an effort to free himself from the invading host of fancies that beset him, and lifted his eyes from the shelter of his palm.

The wet, colourless world was revealed about him; a long gleam of yellow silver divided earth from sky. He saw before him flat meadow land, a few bare trees, a distant wood.

He moved stiffly and looked round for Carola.

Under one of the poplars was the figure of the young woman

standing in much the same attitude as that he had observed at the fete a few days ago, very still, her head slightly bent, her whole pose expressing containment, humility, and yet a certain pride. His fantasy of a peasant girl was dispelled now. Her clothes, though wet and mud-stained, showed of an incongruous grandeur: the dress that trailed over the damp fallen leaves was brocade and shot with gold threads, the white feathers on her drooping beaver were fastened with a jewelled clasp, and in her ears hung long red diamonds.

She seemed to feel his gaze on her, for she raised and turned her head. Her black hair had fallen under her hat and lay heavy in the folds of her violet velvet cloak.

"We can go on our way now," she said evenly.

Luc looked at what lay between him and her: a bundle wrapped in the gaudy striped mummer's cloak; at one end two small feet clad in bright green stockings showed, and at the other a fair damp curl had fallen between the folds of the wrap.

He glanced away, utterly sick; not all the dead that had lined the way from Prague to Eger had power to move him as this little corpse. He heard Carola coming over the leaves, but would not look round.

Now the sun was above the horizon, the whole landscape was brightening rapidly; a faint sparkle of gold began to appear on the wet leaves, on the wet grass. Luc saw the two horses waiting with drooping heads not far off. With a long shiver he moved towards them; when he returned with the bridles in his hand, he found Carola kneeling beside the little girl, who was now decently covered from head to foot in the velvet cloak, which folded her like a rich pall.

Carola was praying. She held between her bare ringless hands a silver and ivory rosary. Her head was bowed reverently, so that her

face was hidden by the shade of her hat. The strengthening sun gleamed on the red and gold and brown of the riding-habit that revealed her slight, womanly figure.

Luc stood watching her.

"Do you find consolation in that, Madame?" he asked gently.

She looked up; then, seeing he was holding the horses, rose, slipping the rosary back into the bosom of her gown.

"If not there, where else?" she asked, very sadly. "God is the only kind person I know."

She came towards her horse, and he helped her to mount. When she was in the saddle he gave her his cloak, and she took it now, without a word, and shivered into it. The dawn seemed colder than the night.

"Do you remember the story of Madame de Montespan and the pigs?" she asked, leaning a little towards Luc.

He stared at her.

"She was very beautiful and very great," continued Carola, "and when King Louis loved her there were no flowers in France considered worthy to lie on her breast. Then when she fell into disgrace she left the Court and died--still beautiful. And they took her heart to bury it at a certain convent; and the peasant who carried it became weary of the journey, and cast the heart into a ditch, and turned back--and no one cared. And some pigs nosing in the ditch ate the heart of the beautiful Marquise, and lay down that night in their sty with the proudest blood in France staining their jaws--and *no one cared* except God!" Her eyes flashed. "I think He remembered it against King Louis."

"Why do you tell me this?" asked Luc, with a shudder.

"Because I have been thrown to the ditch and the swine," she answered; "and out of the dirt I ask God to remember that I have paid for some of my sins--here on earth."

He did not understand her, but her speech held him. With his hand on his bridle, he looked up at her, his haggard, resolute, and beautiful face clear in the light of the rising sun.

"M. de Richelieu--" he began.

"Let M. de Richelieu be!" answered Carola. "It is *you* who have punished me most."

"I?" he questioned.

"You--to-night--when I was lonely as the damned--and facing death and hell--and you would not kiss me." Luc looked at her steadily.

"You have cast my heart alive to the swine," she said, in a trembling voice, "and God will remember it against you."

He caught her meaning through a confusion of pain. He realized his own self-absorption; he saw, suddenly and very vividly, her point of view.

"You think I hold you in contempt?" he said hoarsely.

"Why not?" she answered. "Why not?"

Luc shook his head.

"I am not fine, and I am not true," said Carola. "There is no paint on my face now, and you must see I am a very common creature,

Monsieur le Marquis."

Luc's hand was so slack on the bridle that his horse began cropping the thin blades of grass that sprouted between the dead leaves.

"Give me the child," said the Countess.

The day was quite bright now; fields of emerald, skies of pale azure, trees of faint gold were about them as he raised his burden to her saddle. The purple velvet trailed over the wet sides of her white horse; he flung across his own holster the coarse striped mantle, and mounted.

"These nuns," she said, "are very good. They had, three years ago, when the plague was bad, a hundred people in their hospice."

Luc offered to take the mummer's child from her, but she refused. They rode from the fields on to the flat, muddy grey road. The horses were weary, and Carola, using only one hand, rode awkwardly. They went slowly across a country that was wet, glimmering, and silent.

Luc's thoughts began to stir like waking birds, first shivering, then mounting into the circle of the sunlight. All disturbing pictures of the past vanished from his mind; he only saw the future, an ineffable blaze of glory. He spoke aloud, lifting his face to the fragrant early heavens.

"Whatever happens, I will overcome," he said.

Carola looked at him, and seemed to shrink into herself. They neither of them spoke until they had crossed a river by a low bridge, and ridden up to the walls and outbuildings of an ancient abbey and convent.

Luc dismounted and helped Carola from her horse. Between them

they laid the little girl on the long grass beneath the wall. Luc fastened the horses to a staple that was there for that purpose; his hands were very cold and his whole body shivering. When he came back to the narrow door, he found Carola standing beside the great iron bell. Above her head an ash drooped over the wall; the hard scarlet fruit hung against the grey stone and mortar. She had removed her hat; through the fine black ringlets showed the long red diamonds, flame in crystal, that glittered in her ears. Under Luc's black cloak, her dress gleamed rich, and soft, and bright. Her face was pallid, hollow, and expressionless.

Luc stepped towards her. She thought he meant to ring, and moved aside; but he stopped before her, looking at her intently.

She glanced up at that: her eyes were bloodshot, and the lids swollen. He saw that she must have been crying, silently, in the dark. She seemed frightened and very humble. She held herself flat against the wall, and the beaver she held dropped from her loosening fingers.

Luc took off his hat. His face was serene and proud; his long locks of hazel-coloured hair, escaping from the black ribbon, blew over his forehead and shoulders; his cravat and the thick lace on his bosom stirred in this same breeze. The beautiful lines of his face showed fatigue but no sadness, and his eyes were clear and radiant.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Clèmence," she answered.

"Clèmence!"

"It is true--that was my name in Provence," she murmured. "I would never have told you--why did you ask?"

"Clémence," he repeated. He stood with his hat in his hand as if he was in attendance on a great lady.

"Why do you not ring?" she asked hoarsely.

He made a gesture with his sword hand towards the convent.

"You know what we go into," he said: "perhaps death--perhaps hideous corruption."

She smiled bravely.

"There is no need that a nun should be--desirable."

"You are not afraid?"

"No."

"Ah--I saw a man once--who had been a soldier--disfigured."

"I know. I have seen them. I hope it may be me, not you. Ring, Monsieur."

"One moment. We are set apart from the world, you and I, Clémence. We have met many times, very strangely. I think this is going to be the last time."

"The last time," she echoed. "And you--are afraid?"

"Afraid that I may miss death, and live--useless. Afraid of--her--afterwards; afraid--of fear." He smiled grandly as he spoke.

"I am the only person who will ever know that," she said proudly.

He held out his right hand; she put hers into it, and then he cast his

hat away, and suddenly clasped her.

"Take the last kiss I have to give in this gorgeous world!" she cried.

As he kissed her, she sobbed in her throat; and her quick tears wetted his cheek as their lips met the second time. He kissed the ends of her hair, her neck, her hands, the brocade that covered her bosom, then let her free of his embrace, and pulled the long iron chain.

As the strident clang of the bell echoed through the convent, he picked up her beaver and gave it her.

"You know?" she asked. Her lips were still throbbing, so that she could scarcely speak.

"Know?" he murmured unsteadily.

"The great--the useless--love I have always had--for you."

The convent door opened.

XIV. IN THE CONVENT

Luc sat in the front room of the gardener's cottage, looking out on the whitewashed wall of the hospice.

He felt utterly weary; the exaltation and the ecstatic visions of the morning had faded. In the next room the dead child lay waiting for her coffin; a sound of sawing wood came harshly from a shed near by.

Luc rested his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands; he had taken off his sword, and laid it across the wand-bottomed chair by the window. As he sat motionless, he noticed the pale November

sunlight sparkling along the scabbard, the shell, and the quillons.

"A useless sword," he found himself saying. He looked round the room, at the bare walls, the rough furniture, the image of St. Joseph in a corner niche. It seemed to him like a prison cell, though he had often lodged more rudely. The plaster image and the faint stale scent of incense filled him with disgust; he longed for Paris and the great muddy river, or for Aix and his own home. The door that gave on to the garden opened, and Luc rose stiffly to meet the person he expected, the nun the lay sister had promised to send.

The Countess had not given him the name of the convent, but he recalled that it was an order of Ursuline sisters. Since his childhood, he had seen them walking in twos through the streets of Aix.

The nun closed the door, and looked at him with steady courtesy. Her face, her hands, and her serge robe were all faded and worn; the line of white that enclosed her face was vivid in contrast to her parched and withered skin; her eyes were inscrutable, her whole expression worldly and slightly amused.

"You will remain our guest, Monsieur?" she said.

"I have no right," answered Luc. "I should have left before but that I feared to carry the infection."

"You did a reckless thing," said the nun quietly. "The child died of the black smallpox. I have nursed many cases."

"And never been stricken yourself, sister?" asked Luc gently.

"No."

"I may be as fortunate."

The alert grey eyes glanced slowly over his graceful person, his beautiful face. "You may, Monsieur de Vauvenargues. At least, you are in good hands here. The house of de Clapiers has always been generous to us. You do not remember the Great Plague? I worked with your father then in Aix."

Luc coloured and his eyes narrowed.

"I do not like to stay, my sister."

She smiled.

"You think we are afraid, perhaps? Madame la Comtesse knew better. And where would you go, Monsieur?"

He was indeed at a loss. He shook his head, and her smile deepened.

"If I stay, my sister, I must work. You have sick here?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

"I can help you. I have learnt, in war, to do little services for the sick."

"If you wish, Monsieur. They are all very miserable, humble people."

Luc looked at her quickly, and the colour flushed deeper into his sensitive face.

"I must tell you one thing, my sister. I have no right to your hospitality, as I said. I do not believe."

"Ah?" she said gravely.

"I am a follower of M. de Voltaire."

"And we are followers of Christ," answered the nun serenely, "and in His name we bid you welcome, whoever you are."

Luc bent his head.

"May I remain here, in this cottage?"

"If you wish. But the Abbess would desire you to have the guest-house, Monsieur."

"I would rather be here, my sister."

The nun smiled again.

"The man is old, and has had the plague," she answered; "that is your reason, I think. Very well; I will tell the Abbess. We have sent a messenger to Monsieur your father. And that is all I have to say, Monsieur."

Luc thanked her reverently. He was glad when she again left him, for her calm, expressionless presence oppressed him. He set his lips and went to the window, where his sight was bounded by the white sunny walls of the hospice; he longed to see a wide sweep of country, a distant horizon.

The sawing ceased, and there was a sound of hammering in its place, as of nails being knocked in. Luc began pacing up and down the narrow room. He picked up his sword presently and strapped it on; as he drew the thong through the last buckle, Carola entered. He looked over his shoulder at her, moved his lips, but did not speak.

She had not changed her gown, but she wore no jewellery, and her hair was drawn away from her face and fastened on her neck.

"I came to see the child," she said. "I want this buried with her."

She held out a narrow white hand on which lay a diamond ring with sapphire points.

"M. de Richelieu told me its history," she continued, "the bribe, the wages, that you refused and that I took. This is the last of it."

"You have a strange fancy," said Luc.

She passed him and went into the inner room.

He waited for her return with a blank mind, listening to the even blows of the coffin-maker.

After a few moments she came back and crossed to the wide hearth, where a meagre fire burned. An iron saucepan of soup stood on the tiles; she placed it on the fire, Luc the while looking at her. When she rose from her knees, she was once more face to face with him.

"You are staying here?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Probably I shall not see you again," she said. "I put on the habit of a novice to-morrow."

"I wish," answered Luc, "I found it so easy to leave the world, but while I breathe I cannot. Even this confinement irks me. If I live, I shall go back to my ambitions."

"Something is wrong," said Carola; "you or I—or God."

"Why?" he answered, with a grave gentleness. "I thought you had found happiness."

"I have found an opiate, Monsieur."

They were both silent; then she turned towards the door.

Her splendid dress was as incongruous here as it had been in the wet fields; it jarred on Luc to see her in such surroundings.

He turned suddenly and followed her. "You beautiful, foolish woman," he cried, "what are you doing in a convent? Go back to Versailles."

"Is that your advice to me?" she asked slowly.

"Advice! I know not--but this is death."

"Yes, death," answered Carola.

She lifted the latch of the door.

"Will you pray for me?" smiled Luc.

"Yes."

"Then put your prayers this way--that if I am stricken I may die."

"Death for both of us, then, it seems," she replied. "How suddenly it has come, Monsieur."

Luc pressed his hands to his bosom.

"My God, my God!" he cried fiercely, "I want to *live* or *die*--do you not understand? I have seen them--half blind, crawling, hideous."

"But your spirit would be always beautiful," said Carola gently, "and always triumphant."

They stood looking at each other, the width of the room between

them. A bar of clear sunlight fell through the half-open door across her gown and across the floor. The sounds from the carpenter's shed came distinctly, and then presently the cold call of the convent bell. Luc remained in an attitude of arrested movement, with his hands at his heart and his deep eyes on her. Unnatural beauty rested on his absorbed face, which was flushed and quivering.

"Monsieur," said Carola, "when you have attained--but words are useless; and after all, I do not think that you will ever forget me."

"No, Clèmence," he answered, with great sweetness. "You will remember me for my name's sake."

She opened the door a little wider; she was a thing of gorgeous colours and delicate shape against the whitewashed wall.

"Good-bye," she said.

A great faintness came over Luc; he held himself erect with difficulty; he felt that something was going out of his life that would never come into it again, as he had felt last night that he was riding away from a world he would never enter more. Ambition, resolution, fear were all lost in a sudden anguish of regret.

"Good-bye," repeated the woman.

"Good-bye," answered Luc.

A sense of the inevitable held him passive. She went out quietly; the latch clicked into place. He turned his head towards the window and saw her pass the white wall of the hospice; she was looking down, and he noticed that the black coil of hair at the nape of her neck had become loosened and was slipping free in long ringlets. She passed and was gone.

He stood for a while gazing at the blank window, then walked to the inner door and leant against it heavily.

The wall seemed transparent; it was as if he could see the chamber within, the pallet bed, the little corpse with the ring hidden in her shroud.

The convent bell ceased.

The door through which Carola had gone opened, and the gardener and a boy entered, carrying between them a rough wood coffin, of a ghastly smallness.

"Eh, Monsieur, we are late for breakfast," said the man.

The boy nodded towards the fire.

"But Monseigneur has put the soup on, and it is boiling over."

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PART III. THE QUEST TRIUMPHANT

"Quand je parle de vertu, je ne parle point de ces qualités imaginaires qui n'appartiennent pas à la nature humaine: je parle de cette force et de cette grandeur de l'âme, qui, comparée aux sentiments des esprits faibles, méritent les noms que je leur donne." *Discours sur le caractère des différents siècles*, MARQUIS DE VAUVENARGUES.

"Insensés que nous sommes, nous craignons toujours d'être dupes ou de l'activité, ou de la gloire, ou de la vertu! Mais qui fait plus de dupes véritables que l'oubli de ces mêmes choses? qui fait des promesses plus trompeuses que l'oisiveté?"—*Discours sur la gloire*.

I. THE FATHER

"My son is coming home to-morrow," said the old Marquis.

Mademoiselle de Séguy drew the white fur of her hood closer together under her chin.

"Yes," she answered; "it has seemed a long time."

"Two months," said M. de Vauvenargues, "two months. He saved Aix, you know."

"Oh yes," replied the girl vaguely. "Oh yes."

They were walking up and down the hard gravel paths of the garden of Luc's home in Aix; a faint film of frost lay over the water in the fountain basin, but the air was clear and bright, and through the damp rotting leaves on the flower-beds the first white and green of the snowdrops showed.

"Why has he been away so long?" asked Clémence again. "He was out of the plague in a few days."

"He has been gaining strength," returned the Marquis. "He was very, very ill. The doctor told me that it was one of God's marvels that he has recovered at all. He has never been strong since the campaign in Bohemia."

The girl glanced covertly at the noble, proud, and haggard face of her companion.

"There is something I want to ask you," she said hurriedly.

"Yes, my child," he answered gravely.

"Is he--will he be able to go to Madrid?"

A dark look clouded the old man's eyes.

"Why do you want to know? Is it not enough that he is coming home to-morrow?" he replied.

"Yes; ah, yes. But I wondered--his career."

The Marquis flashed round on her.

"Do you think of his career, when his life has only been spared by a miracle?"

She shrank away from him.

"For his sake I think of it," she answered piteously. "He was always so ardent for--glory."

An expression so terrible, so swiftly distorting, passed over the fine

features of the Marquis that Clémence stopped in her walk to stare at him.

"Come into the house," he said, gripping her arm. "*I wish to speak to you.*"

She murmured some awed response, and came obediently.

They entered the dark, heavy dining-room by the window where Luc had stood the day of his return from the war, and watched his father, his brother, and the bright dogs in the summer garden.

The Marquis closed the window. There was a great fire on the hearth, and Clémence crouched close to it, mechanically loosening her furred cloak and pulling off her doeskin gloves.

M. de Vauvenargues seated himself on the other side of the long black polished table. His erect, massive figure; his old-fashioned, handsome clothes; his aristocratic, proud, yet simple and kindly face, were flooded with red light from the fire, which threw it up against the sombre background of the dark chamber that always, even on the most brilliant day, seemed filled with shadows.

He leant a little forward, and fixed his eyes on the rosy vision of the young girl in her white fur, white silk, and gold laces.

"You love Luc, do you not?" he asked, in a terrible voice.

Her eyes widened, holding his in a full stare of terror.

"Take care what you commit yourself to," he continued.

"Think before you answer. Do you love my son?"

"Yes," answered Clémence. "How strange for you to ask me,

Monseigneur!"

"You have never been to see him--not even when all fear of infection was over."

She flushed painfully.

"He did not wish me to--you told me so yourself."

"Well, you will see him to-morrow, Clèmence." The strong voice was touched with tenderness and sorrow. "And you love him? You know what that means?--Love?"

"Yes, yes," shivered Clèmence.

For a while--a very little while--the Marquis was silent; then he said--

"Luc will not be able to go to Madrid."

"Ah!" she murmured.

"He wrote yesterday," continued the Marquis, "to refuse the post. He will never be able to do any work again." Clèmence clenched her hands on her lap.

"He is--not strong enough?"

"No."

"He has--no career?"

"No."

"I do not quite understand." She frowned over her words. "He is recovered?"

"He will never completely recover."

"Monseigneur, you frighten me. What has happened to Luc?"

"Whatever has happened it can make no difference to us who love him," answered the Marquis. His eyes held Clèmence with a power before which she blanched.

"No, of course not," she said in a laboured way "But--I am sorry for Luc," she ended feebly.

"Mademoiselle," replied M. de Vauvenargues proudly, "this is not a thing one is *sorry* for. It is a great tragedy."

"A--tragedy?"

"The word frightens you? But remember that it is in your power to soften it. Luc has lost everything--but you."

"Oh!" she murmured again. "Yet if he is well--"

The Marquis lifted his head still higher, never taking his eyes from her changing face.

"You have seen people who have had the plague?"

She gave some miserable little exclamation under her breath. He waited for her to find words.

"He is changed?" she managed at last.

"Yes."

She tried to smile.

"Well, I suppose--not much."

"A great deal."

Clémence rose, sat down, and rose again.

"Changed--very much?"

"So changed," said the Marquis slowly, "that only those who love him would know him."

"Monseigneur, you try to frighten me!"

"You have to see him to-morrow."

Her breast heaved and her soft eyes were rebellious.

"He was--beautiful," she murmured. "I think he had no right. He did not think of me."

"He kept the plague from you--from Aix."

She took no notice.

"For a vagabond's child," she continued--"for the sake of a thing of nought!"

"No," interrupted the Marquis sternly, "for the sake of his honour."

Clémence dropped again into the great black chair by the fire.

"You will be here to welcome him to-morrow?" he added. "He speaks of you so often."

She did not reply.

"Why do you not answer?" he asked harshly.

"Oh, I shall be here," she answered. "I was thinking of--how differently--I dreamed it."

She rose again, picked up her swansdown-edged muff, her gloves, her cane, and fastened her cloak at the chin.

"Good-bye, Monseigneur," she said timidly. "My father will bring me to-morrow. I will go now--I think--the horses will be tired--of waiting."

She curtsied and was turning away when the Marquis rose suddenly and stood between her and the door. "Mademoiselle," he said hoarsely.

She stopped and looked at him. He was no longer erect, no longer haughty. He looked old and bitterly troubled. He stood in a deprecating attitude before her delicate young loveliness.

"Forgive me if I was harsh," he said thickly. "I have no right perhaps to ask what I do."

She shuddered violently.

"I entreat you not to forsake my son," continued the old man passionately--"I implore you."

She closed her eyes.

"I will not deceive you, Mademoiselle. He is--to a woman's eyes--you may imagine."

She shrank against the wall.

The Marquis continued, forcing the words out in almost incoherent

agitation--

"You know what I wish to say, Mademoiselle. You must see him tomorrow. His strength has gone--and his comeliness. He could not use--a sword--or ride a horse--he--Oh, my God!"

He brought his hands to his grey hair with a gesture of agony.

Clémence quivered into a little sob; she opened her eyes fearfully.

"This is a great scourge," continued the Marquis, struggling for command over himself--"a great scourge. I want to tell you everything. He is--almost--blind."

His head sank as if he had confessed a crime. But this humiliation of his fine nobility was lost on Clémence; his words alone impressed her.

"Why was I not told before?" she asked frantically. "We had not the courage," the old man confessed. "And if you love him--"

"Oh, if I love him!" she interrupted. "I loved the Luc de Clapiers that was!"

"He is still the same in spirit, still my son, still your lover. Why, this is a chance for you." He spoke with piteous eagerness. "You used to say how you wished you could prove your love. Do you not remember? Luc told me once--he spoke like a man who holds the Eucharist in his hands when he told me that you had said you wished you could prove--This is your chance."

Her heaving bosom, her eyes, the rise and fall of colour in her cheeks bespoke desperation.

"And you have told me again--just now, that you love him."

"Monseigneur, give me time--let me think. This is very terrible. I pity him--oh, how I pity him!"

"Pity him! You should be proud of him."

"Yes, that too--but I am distracted--give me time."

"There is no time. He is coming home to-morrow. There is your chance, Mademoiselle; you must meet him--as if--he were *the same*."

She put her hands before her eyes.

"I do not think--I can," she whispered.

The Marquis flashed into wild anger.

"Then you never loved *him*! You were toying with youth and gallantry, and his devotion was but like a brooch to your gown--and you vowed constancy because it sounded pretty, and you liked to be with him because he was a graceful cavalier--you did not love him for his noble soul as it walked before God!"

She cowered and trembled under his fierce rush of words.

"But you pretended you did, Mademoiselle, and now you shall pay the penalty of your pretence."

She could not answer. He caught her wrist. Then his wrath died, and he was old, and broken, and pitiful again. "Mademoiselle--my son used to kiss you?"

She stared forlornly.

"Think of him when he used to kiss you."

Her face flushed.

"Ah, Monseigneur!"

"Forgive an old man, very humble before your beauty. I think no one else ever kissed you?"

"Never," she said fiercely--"never--nor he often; I could not bear it, for I loved him--too much."

She drew her hand away, and as if her own words had loosened memories of too sweet a rapture to be endured she began to weep hotly.

"You can never forsake him!" cried the Marquis. "No--no--and you will make life so pleasant to him that he will not regret even--glory."

He took the hem of her cloak and kissed it.

"Thank God for women like you."

She looked up with wet and terrified eyes.

"Do not praise me--I do not know myself--I must have been very young--a few months ago--I said things I did not understand. Let me go, Monseigneur."

She made an effort to pass him, but he arrested her.

"You will not leave me like this, Mademoiselle. He is not so changed--I wanted to prepare you, that is all--his mother thought there was very little difference."

"Ah, his mother," murmured Clémence. "I was to be his wife."

"You will be. I will do anything for you--anything. You shall live in Aix--we shall all worship you--and you will be happy."

"But if I cannot make *him* happy?" she asked mournfully.

"You will, you will, you must! He loves you--there will be nothing else in the world for him." The old man could not contain his anguish of apprehension. "Do not tell me that you could forsake him!"

She dried her eyes on a little handkerchief she took from her muff; after a few seconds of self-control she spoke gently--

"Monseigneur, I shall be here to-morrow. I am not going to break the promise I gave Luc. I am quite--content--only a little shocked. Please do not grieve so--he might have died, you know." She smiled wistfully.

He kissed her hands, and she felt his hard wrung tears on them. When he raised his head she leant forward and kissed his poor wrinkled cheek, then left him swiftly with no backward look.

"*Might* have died," she wailed to herself as she shivered down the hall; "he ought to have died for every one's sake--feeble, disfigured, nearly--blind!"

Such a tumult of terror seized her as she fled from the house of the de Clapiers that she was aware of nothing but the tremendous beating of her heart that seemed to echo through her whole body.

II. RETURN TO LIFE!

Luc De Clapiers lay on the humble bed in the back room of the

gardener's cottage; in the outer chamber his servant was packing and gossiping with the convent porter.

Luc was fully dressed. His sword, hat, and cloak, sent yesterday from Aix (since all his infected clothing had been burned), lay across a chair beneath the window.

Outside the birds were singing, and their flying shadows crossed and recrossed the white corner of the hospice wall. Presently Luc raised himself on one elbow.

"Jean!" he called.

The man came instantly.

"What time is it, Jean?"

"About half-past two, Monseigneur."

"Thank you. I am going into the chapel for a little while. I shall be back when Monsieur, my father, comes."

He rose stiffly and feebly, and stood leaning against the end of the bed.

"What is that which continually goes past the window, Jean?"

"Birds, Monseigneur--only little birds."

Luc smiled.

"Indeed, I cannot see them, Jean."

The servant waited, not looking at his master. Presently Luc gave a little nod of dismissal, and Jean returned to the outer room.

Luc decided not to go to the chapel. He had thought that the dark, cool spaces, the nuns behind their grille, the subdued singing might bring him fortitude and peace; but now he rejected that idea as weakness.

He had also wished to inquire after Carola Koklinska before he left the convent. Yet to what purpose? She was lost to the world, and her name had not passed his lips once during the brief agony of his illness and the long agony of his convalescence.

He recalled his last interview with her and his words, "If I am stricken, pray that I may die."

And now his worst horror had been realized, and he was cast back on life to die slowly from day to day--an object of disgust and pity. He knew, though no one else had been told, that he had not very long to live. The doctor gave him a few years--five, or six, or seven.

Three days ago he had first seen himself in a mirror. Two days ago he had written to M. Amelot saying that his health did not permit him to take up the appointment at Madrid.

And to-day he had to see Clémence de Séguy.

He had gently told Jean to leave the mirror, and it hung against the wall at the foot of his bed.

He turned to it now, took it down and brought it to the full light of the window, held it between his hands, and gazed into it.

He could only see very imperfectly. Objects had lost their sharp outlines, their true colours; things beyond the radius of his own outstretched hand were dim and obscure. He peered into the mirror with the stoop and concentration of gaze of an old man.

He saw, as behind a blur, his own face, chalk-white, scarred, and seamed with a faint bluish colour; his eyes frayed, and swollen, yet sunk; his mouth strained and distorted—a face without bloom, or youth, or softness—a terrible face, from which all beauty, all expression had been swept, for in the ruins of these pale features was not one trace of the fair, mobile, spiritual countenance that had once shown to the world the soul of Luc de Clapiers.

His fine hazel hair had gone. He wore a curled white peruke, which further altered his appearance. He was so feeble he could not hold himself erect; he stooped from the shoulders and was gauntly thin. Presently he put the mirror on the bed, and two difficult tears forced themselves out of his worn eyes and ran down his disfigured cheeks.

Outside the birds were flying to and fro, and the fragrant perfumes of early spring swelled and receded on the full breeze.

The scent of earth, of flowers, of young trees came to Luc's nostrils. He shuddered like one struck on an open wound.

He went to the window, stood with his hands on the rough sill, looking on to the little patch of herb garden and the whitewashed corner of the building.

"Come, face it," he said to himself. "You are young, full of energy, of ardour, of ambition, of desire for glory; you can appreciate all that is good and beautiful. Yet now, at the flower of your age, you are deprived of everything that makes life desirable; you have only a few more years to live, and they will be full of pain and suffering--then--an obscure death. And all your gifts, your ardours, your hopes, your ambitions will perish with you, leaving no glimmer behind. Face that, Luc de Clapiers--face that!"

There was nothing left--nothing but the pitying love of those who

would smooth his way to death, and to a proud soldier's soul such tenderness was unendurable.

He picked up the sword he could never use again and buckled it on slowly, then left the cottage and turned, after all, towards the chapel attached to the convent. The service was nearly over. Luc seated himself near the door in the shadows. The nuns were behind their grille; in the body of the chapel were a few lay sisters.

Presently Luc went on his knees and prayed from a bitterly humbled heart--prayed incoherently, passionately to the God of his forefathers--

"God! O God! what have I done? What offence armed your wrath against me? You have filled my life with bitterness. Pleasure, health, youth are robbed from me glory that flattered so long the dream of an ambitious soul--all is gone!"

"I let my glance fall on the enchanting gifts of the world, and suddenly they are all taken from me. Miseries, cares, regrets overwhelm my soul!"

The silent prayer beat in his brain. His heart swooned in his side. He felt roof and walls vanish from about him and a sensation as if he were surrounded by clear heavens and a multitude of swaying clouds. But the murmur of the service was in his ears only a human thing. The God he prayed to was foreign; he could not find help here.

"O my soul, show thyself strong in these great trials, be patient, trust in thyself; thy ills will end. Nothing is stable; the earth itself and the skies vanish as a dream. The dawn of eternity will light the bottom of the tomb, and death shall have no dark places left!"

The service was over; the nuns departed from behind the grille, the

lay sisters moved away, but Luc remained on his knees.

Yet his thoughts had swept swiftly far from the God to whom this church was consecrated. Out of his own soul he had drawn strength and sweetness.

"How can there be a struggle with misfortune and evil when man is stronger than either?" he asked himself. And at one bound his heart leapt to life and energy.

He rose to his feet.

"I dedicated my life to virtue and glory. What prevents me from using the few years left to me in the service of the best things I know? I am stronger than Fate. There is nothing mightier in creation than the soul lodged in me. I and God are one. I need not fear anything, for I am the highest tribunal and the most powerful law, and I can satisfy myself."

His hand touched the smooth, cold pillar beside him. The feel of the stone, the sting of the incense were repugnant to him. The heat and glow in his heart warmed his frail body. He drew his thin, stooping shoulders erect and left the chapel.

The image of Carola came fiercely to his mind. He trembled to think that perhaps she had been one of those shrouded figures behind the grille. Across the black gulf of his illness he beheld her figure beneath the iron bell and the clusters of ash berries. He heard her words, and felt her sobbing lips under his kiss and her cold hands in his.

A sister was crossing the courtyard, carrying a basket filled with herbs. Luc turned on his heel and saluted her.

"I am leaving to-day, my sister. Before I go, may I ask you a question?"

"Yes, Monseigneur."

"There was a lady came with me--Madame Koklinska."

"Yes."

"It was her intention to enter your order."

"She became a novice, Monseigneur, and helped for a while in the hospice."

"For a while?" The scent of the bruised and fainting herbs was borne on him overpoweringly.

"She took the smallpox, Monseigneur, within a few days of you. She died, I think, a month ago. We had only one other death from the plague."

"Thank you, my sister," answered Luc gravely.

The sister passed on, and Luc stood silent in the sunny courtyard.

Dead! In what faith, in what mood, in what repentance, remorse, or fear? Dead without consolation, or love, among strangers--young and beautiful, and, he knew, without fear.

For a moment he was shaken by a wild revulsion, a desperate revolt against his own renewed triumphant exaltation and proud freedom. In that moment he would have put on all the shackles of her creed in return for the certain hope of seeing her again; he would have embraced any faith that had promised him that they should meet once more--even for a few minutes. A little while before and he had

been prepared to believe that he would never see her again--prepared even not to think of her. Now he would have paid any price just to see her tired face and listen to her low, precise voice. He went back to the gardener's cottage, and his eyes sought the little cheap plaster image of St. Joseph in the corner. If one could *believe*. He shook off the temptation, the delusion--she was gone. When he had seen her pass the white wall of the hospice she had left him for ever--and he had known it even then.

"I-suppose--I-loved--her," he said to himself; but he had no understanding of any emotion outside confusion and loneliness. He did not see the room or the sunshine, but a white, sparkling expanse of snow, a great silver fir, and a woman on a white horse who leant from the saddle and looked at him.

He found his father standing where she had stood when he had seen her for the last time.

"I have come for you, Luc."

The old Marquis stood erect and proud, handsomely dressed, composed.

"Clémence is waiting for you," he continued. "She would have accompanied me, but I thought you would rather meet her at home."

The name hurt and startled Luc. He made an effort to think coherently. He forced his thoughts on to the coming moments.

"Monseigneur," he asked, "Mademoiselle de Sèguy--knows?"

"Knows what?" demanded the Marquis in a still voice.

Luc's dim eyes filled with tenderness. He answered very gently--

"Knows that she is free, my father."

The old man gallantly kept his pose, his calm.

"You must not speak like that, Luc. Mademoiselle de Sèguy loves you--nothing makes any difference to her. She is eager--"

"Ah, hush!" said Luc sadly, yet serenely. "Look at me, Monseigneur--look at me--think of her--of any woman. I have known a long while that it could never be. Surely neither you nor she think I would ask this sacrifice?"

"This is not the language of love," said the Marquis firmly. "Do you not recall how she wished to prove herself? how she wished to show what her affection meant?"

Luc did remember, with a swift, sharp sense of longing and regret, the brief days he had spent with his promised wife--her vows--her devotion.

"God bless her for her brave loyalty," he said unsteadily; "but my life is too broken now ever to be joined to another. She is a sweet woman. I hope she will find great happiness."

"With you, Luc, with you," cried the Marquis vehemently. "She is waiting for you; she is constant to you. Do not cast away the best thing left to you."

"My father," cried Luc, "do not you tempt me! I have faced it all. I counted the cost that night I rode here. I knew then I had lost her. Do not speak of it."

Something in his quivering tone quelled the old man.

"You will at least see her?" he asked humbly, in the wild hope that

Clémence's pity and generous tenderness might overcome his son's resolution. "She looks upon you as her future husband."

"I will see her," answered Luc, and his scarred face flushed dully. "I fear I have given her some pain--and you, and my mother, Monseigneur. I must adjust it all as best I may."

And while he spoke he was thinking, "She left no message. I wonder if she spoke of me, or thought of me at all?"

"Our home is at Aix," said the old Marquis, "and you are my eldest son. I, as you know, was never eager for you to go to Paris--but you had then--ambitions--and I acceded to them. Now I shall be glad to have you at home, and after a little while you also, Luc, will be glad to be with your own people."

Through Luc's brain ran the weary question, "If I had known it was for the last time, would it have made any difference? Yet I did know."

Aloud he said--

"Mademoiselle must be free, my father. It was never in my mind that she believed herself bound."

"But you have promised me that you will see her."

"Yes," answered Luc sadly. "Poor child!"

The Marquis hesitated, looked on the ground, then raised his head suddenly.

"Luc," he said, "this alliance is an honour to M. de Sèguy and to his daughter."

The bowed young man turned his disfigured eyes on his father with

another kind of pride.

"My God, look at me!" he said.

M. de Vauvenargues shivered, but the haughty expression of his face did not relax.

"You are Luc de Clapiers, and my eldest son," he answered.

"And for that reason I shall not marry Mademoiselle de Sèguy," said Luc gently, "because it would be so--unworthy."

A dark flush came over the Marquis's face. He turned abruptly and left the room. His heavy, proud tread echoed with a sound of authority through the confined, silent spaces of the convent.

Luc remained for a moment with his dim gaze resting on the door through which she had passed for the last time. He could recall every fold of her brocade gown, every line and shade in her face, every curl and twist in the long, loose knot of her dark hair.

He wondered where her grave was, and how she had looked in her shroud. His vivid fancy pictured her the thing of loathing into which the hideous disease she died of had turned her--and shuddered back from that image, and saw her again standing against the whitewashed walls saying, "Good-bye."

"Clèmence," he said under his breath, and saw two women--one forgone and lost, one to forgo and lose.

III. THE BETROTHED

He met her in his father's house that evening. He entered upon her through the folding doors of the withdrawing-room, and saw her

before she saw him.

The sight of her filled him with an almost intolerable yearning and longing for that happiness he must never enjoy. She was standing by the fire-place. A lamp was on a low table beside her, and it illuminated a gentle beauty that seemed divine to the man who had crawled back mutilated from the embrace of death.

Her vows, her kisses, her joy in his presence, her tremulous hopes of pleasing him rushed back to him. Her fair figure in its setting of light, warmth, comfort, and luxury could not have been more alluring to him. Yet he never hesitated for an instant in his resolution that all the things she stood for were things that must be lost to him for ever.

She was standing very erect, looking into the fire. Her gown was pink and her bosom covered with lace. She held a prayer-book in her left hand.

While Luc still waited, lightly holding the curtain apart, she moved and lowered the lamp.

"Mademoiselle," said Luc.

Her shaking hand shot the wick into darkness.

"Why, Luc," she cried in a trembling voice, "the light has gone out!"

He noted the relief in her tone, and guessed something of the effort to which she had nerved herself; it made him the stronger.

"Mademoiselle," he said, "it is very gracious of you to permit me to take this farewell of you."

Her voice answered weakly out of the fire-flushed darkness--

"Farewell? Farewell?"

He came into the room cautiously and feeling his way by the furniture. The darkness was darkness indeed to him. He could see nothing of her but a rosy glimmer where her skirt caught the direct glow of the flames.

He paused by the head of a sofa which had stood against the wall since he was a child, and gripped the smooth, familiar curl of the back.

"You were never afraid that I should ask more of you than 'farewell,' were you, Mademoiselle?" he said sweetly in his tired, slightly hoarse voice.

She fortified herself by memories, by the thought of the old Marquis, of his mother, by her own ideals. She tried to stifle her fatal pity that wished to weep over him, and to summon instead some ghost of last summer's love to help her.

"Luc," she said, with surprising steadiness, "you must not assume that I am inconstant, ignoble. You need me more than ever."

He interrupted her, very gently.

"But you have no need of me."

"Yes--ah, yes. This is a strange greeting for you to give me--Luc." Her voice rose desperately. "Everything is as it was before."

"No," he said; "everything is changed. You know it--you knew it when you turned the lamp out."

She was silent.

"God knows," he continued slowly, "that it would be pleasant to me to believe what you say--to deceive myself, to sweeten my great loneliness by your loyal duty, by your tender service--by all the gracious phantoms you would conjure from the grave of your dead love--but I am not the coward who would take your sweet self-sacrifice."

"You make *me* a coward!" came her voice, very low. "What am I to say?"

"Farewell," he answered.

He heard her move and saw the blur of her pink skirt pass out of the firelight.

"No," she said, "I *will* be true--I *will* keep my vows--I have no right--"

"Nor I," he put in quickly. He paused a moment, then said quietly, "I have no career before me. I shall always be my father's pensioner, and I shall always be an invalid--and, though no one knows it, the doctor warned me that I have only a few years to live."

"Oh!" shuddered Clémence.

He cautiously moved a little nearer to her, treading delicately and feeling his way.

"There is nothing to grieve over--and nothing to regret," he said, "save that I ever entangled your life with mine, Mademoiselle. Yet it has given me the very sweetest memories--and afterwards, in the long years ahead of you, when you are honoured and loved as you are worthy of being, it cannot lessen your happiness to remember that you were the fairest, most sacred thing in the life of a man who did not know--much joy."

He paused and coughed. She was sobbing childishly.

"Your tears will be repaid you," he added in a faltering voice. "You weep for a man who worships you, and who blesses God for having known you--and when you think afterwards of how much it meant to me to meet this tenderness I could not take, you will not regret those tears, Clémence."

He heard her sobs lessen as she struggled to master her tears; he heard her move towards him.

"Take me," she muttered. "I wish it--I meant what I said--I am yours. I could make you happier--let me--I *will* keep my word."

"Ah, hush!" he answered hoarsely; "you have not even seen me."

"You take away my courage," she interrupted. "I could have done it--you would never have known." She broke into sobs again. "Why did you do it? Why was everything so cruel? I think I shall go mad. Luc, Luc, I loved you--on my soul I did! I would have died for you. But why did you go away and come back changed--changed to me? You do not want my love! You refuse my faith! Who was that woman you went with? Where is she now?"

"Dead--dead--dead."

"Ah! Does it matter to you?"

Luc felt his way nearer to her. He moved into the dim circle of the fire-glow; he could make out her misty shape.

"Do you not want me?" she asked, and her voice was steady now.

"Yes," said Luc--"more than I ever wanted you. You asked about the--Countess. She was brave and kind and, I think, had virtues I know not

of. I was never more than outside her life--she was not of the same blood--she did not understand. You do--you know what I can do--you will not tempt me."

"Tempt you," she repeated softly. "But if I *wanted* it?"

"But you do not, Clèmence," he said gravely and sadly. "You are only pretending for my sake, for my father's sake, for the sake of your own ideals. And presently you would come to hate me."

She rose and moved restlessly.

"Do--you--not believe in love," she asked hesitatingly--"in love being stronger than--anything?"

"Yes."

"Then why cannot we--surmount this?"

Luc was silent.

"Why?" persisted Clèmence.

He thought she was straining towards him through the darkness.

"Ah, my dear!" he cried brokenly, "if you loved me--how different! You said just now, 'I could have done it--you would never have known.' Do not try to deceive me."

There was a long silence, then she answered in a muffled but steady tone--

"You are right, Monsieur. I will not dare to force on you my ideas. You must act by your own--I will not humiliate you by insisting on your taking any sacrifice. I am speaking very coldly. Forgive me. My heart

is not cold. I see there was not in either of our affections anything strong enough to weather storms--and you want the rest of your life free. And I see that you cannot keep me to an old promise--a de Clapiers, Monsieur, can only behave as you have behaved."

She gave a great sigh, as if she was exhausted, and a chill sense of desolation filled the room.

"Tell me," said Luc--"you were afraid?"

"Yes," she admitted lifelessly; "but I would have done it."

"Mademoiselle, I never doubted your courage."

"I--did not lie to you," came her toneless voice, "when I vowed--I meant--"

"I know," he said--"I know."

"And your father--your poor father--"

"He has courage too," answered Luc, and he laughed. "Light the lamp now, Mademoiselle," he added.

"No--my eyes are too tired," she replied hastily.

"Mademoiselle, I am going to strike a light; but first--may I kiss your hand?"

He heard her rise. The fire was dying out and he saw the long gleam of her gown in the faint beams, then her shape came between him and the glow and her hand rested on his. He kissed her fingers, then said, "You would have despised me if I had married you,"--his voice strengthened--"but now you will think of me kindly."

She drew away from him, and seemed to be absorbed and lost in the unbearable darkness.

"I want to see you," said Luc between his teeth.

He took the flint and tinder from his pocket and struck it with a steady hand. As the flame flared up he strained his dim eyes across it to gaze at her. He saw her in an atmosphere of fire--the air all about her was red. Her face was more beautiful than he cared to realize; her eyes looked straight at him across the flame, and they were strained, wide, and dark with terror.

The still burning tinder fell from his fingers; he put his foot on it. A voice he would not have recognized as hers came out of the obscurity.

"You--you are not--much changed."

Luc laughed.

"Heaven bless you," he said sweetly.

She seemed to move desperately; he heard her push a chair aside.

"Oh--God--*God!*" she cried on a note of fainting anguish.

He felt her skirts brush past him, the door opened, a shaft of light penetrated the darkness for a second, then the door closed.

She was gone.

Luc fumbled his way to the sofa where she must have been seated; the cushions were still warm where her face had rested, her tears fallen. He spread his hands over them and shivered from head to foot.

He had never wanted her so much, in all the days of their summer courtship, as he wanted her now.

Yet he was glad she was gone, glad it was over.

She was as lost now as that other Clémence who also had closed a door on him and left him alone.

His grasp tightened on the silk cushions. Out of the depths of his pain and regret flashed the alluring vision of the phantom he had chased all his life.

"Glory!" he said under his breath, "still to be achieved--not with"--he rose, staggering like one intoxicated--"the body"--he clutched the chimneypiece--"but--with--the soul!"

IV. THE CONFLICT

The elder Marquis de Vauvenargues put down the *Gazette* in which he had been reading of the opening of the spring campaign and the progress of the Chevalier de St. George through Scotland, and looked across the dining-room at his eldest son.

Luc stood before the window half concealed by the long folds of the dark crimson curtains. It was late afternoon in March, and the garden was grey, misty, and fragrant; beyond the trees, just blurred with green, glowed the pale, clear blue of the fading sky, mournful, remote, and calm.

"Mademoiselle de Sèguy is leaving for Paris to-morrow," said the Marquis.

"Ah!" answered Luc, without moving his head.

M. de Vauvenargues paused a moment, then added in a low tone--

"It need not have been, Luc, it need not have been."

The young man did not reply, and his father sighed.

"You were always obstinate, Luc," he added with a sad tenderness, "from the day you insisted on entering the army--which was Joseph's place--as the second son."

Luc moved now; he turned his back to the window, facing now the long, dark room, the table on which the fine cloth, cakes, and wine still gleamed, facing the figure of his father in full peruke and black velvet, brilliants and much Michelin lace.

"I am going to prove myself still further obstinate, Monseigneur," he said. He stifled a cough and braced his stooping figure. "I have wished--for some weeks--since I returned from the convent--to speak to you. I think this is my chance."

The old man folded the paper across mechanically, and the great ruffles round his wrists shook with the quivering of his fair hands.

"What can you have to say, Luc?" he asked quickly.

His son came slowly to the table with the hesitating and uncertain step that was the accompaniment of his imperfect sight.

"I want to tell you, Monseigneur, what I mean to do."

He seated himself on the old, high-backed walnut chair with the fringed leather seat which had been his since the time he had sat there, a stately child in skirts, murmuring grace or eating sugared macaroons.

"What you mean to do?" repeated the Marquis.

Luc raised his face. In the cold light of the early year and the shadows of the dark room this face looked like a mask of colourless clay modelled in lines of perpetual pain. The white curls of his wig fell either side on to his green coat, and his hands were again white, one holding the back of the black chair, one resting on the lace cloth.

He looked at his father steadily, and the blood receded from the Marquis's strong features.

"What do you mean to do?" he asked. "Eh, Luc?"

"Monseigneur,"--though the voice was hoarse and broken by constant coughing, there were in it the old sweet notes--"I fear to give you pain. Yet I cannot think that you will not understand."

"I am ready," said his father, "to do anything you wish--you know that--anything."

Again Luc braced himself with an obvious effort; his bent shoulders straightened and he held up his head. "I want--I mean to--go to Paris."

"To--Paris! You want to leave Aix!"

"Monseigneur, I must."

"Luc,"--the Marquis also was endeavouring to remain calm,--"why do you wish to leave your home? What do you intend to do in Paris?"

The young man answered swiftly--

"Give myself a chance--a last chance."

"But you have refused your appointment."

"Forgive me--I do not mean in that way--that is over. You know. Now it is--my soul, unaided. I must satisfy myself before I die. Who knows what is after? And if I leave my life at this I shall have been a sluggard. *I shall not have expressed what was in me to express.*"

He pressed his handkerchief to his lips and gave a little sigh, as if what he had said and the force with which he had spoken exhausted him.

The Marquis stared at him with troubled eyes.

"Explain yourself, Luc. If you wish to go you shall--but--" he paused, at a loss.

"I must go," answered Luc. "I have not very long--not much time. Here I merely let you watch me die."

"Luc--Luc."

"I must speak--forgive me again--you may think I go against my duty."

The Marquis was crumpling the edge of the cloth in nervous fingers.

"What is the object of this resolution?" he demanded. "Tell me clearly. I have a right to know."

Luc answered steadily and sweetly--

"It is hard to pain you, Monseigneur, and before I speak I would implore you to consider that I have not come to this resolution without struggles--so intense, so bitter that I thought I could not live and endure them."

"You frighten me," said the Marquis. "You always had a wild heart--what has it prompted you to now?" Luc bent his head.

"I know a man in Paris who is shaping the thought of France. I told him once what I meant to do, what goal I set myself, and he gave me advice that I rejected. Now other ways are closed to me I shall take this. I think, after all, that he was right. I am going to Paris to join this man and his friends--the people who are making the future of France, of the world. They will help me to so live my last years, to so express the thoughts that come to me that I may die not utterly useless--perhaps even achieving that inward glory that is the paradise of the soul." His voice rose full and clear with emotion and enthusiasm, and his marred eyes flashed with something of the old fire the Luc of yester-year had so often darted on the world.

The old Marquis sat very still. He looked grey, and hard, and massive; his fine right hand clutched and unclutched on the table.

"Who is this man?" he asked.

Luc paused for a moment, then said, without fear or bravado--

"Voltaire."

It was the first time that name had been mentioned in this house without loathing or contempt; it was the first time M. de Vauvenargues had heard it on the lips of his son. His face worked with passion: a heavy flush stained his cheeks, and his eyes were almost hidden by his overhanging, frowning brows.

"You mean to leave Aix to become a follower of M. de-Voltaire?" he said in a low, trembling voice.

"Yes."

"How--what do you mean to do?"

"I mean to collect my writings, to publish them--to write again."

"How do you mean to live?"

"As they lived when they began."

"And you will *write*?"

"Yes--I *must*."

The Marquis rose, and his face was distorted.

"Have you forgotten that you are my son--my eldest son?"

"No." Luc rose also, and stood fronting his father, the table between them.

"And yet you propose to disgrace your blazon!"

"Better disgrace my blazon than my genius!" answered Luc. "I have been fettered all my life--now I have no more time to waste. I am going to answer at *my* tribunal, remember, Monseigneur, not at yours--and *my* judge is not pleased with the things that please Him who judges you."

"You speak blasphemy!" thundered the Marquis. "This twice-damned atheist has poisoned you! There is but one God--beware of Him!"

Luc did not move nor speak. There was no defiance nor anger in his attitude, but a great stillness and sweetness in his air, terrible to his father, who checked his passion as swiftly as he had given it rein and said in a controlled, low, and baffled voice--

"We must speak of these things quietly, Luc. You cannot mean what you say--no, it is not possible. Your whole life cannot have been a lie."

"My life," answered Luc quietly, "has borne witness to the truth as it was revealed to me."

"Yet, if you *do* mean what you say, you have deceived me until this moment."

The young man brought his hands to his bosom.

"I never dared tell you what I really believed, Monseigneur," he said. "Besides, there was no need. I had resolved on the accepted path of honour; I was going the way you had gone, your father before you; I meant to pay all respect to your God; I meant to take a wife of your rank, your faith, your choice---now Fate has ordered differently." He paused, then added in a deeply moved voice, "I have nothing left save the *truth* that is in *myself*."

The old man turned and pointed haughtily to the shield carved above the marble chimneypiece, the fasces of blue and silver, the golden chief.

"You have that," he answered with inexpressible pride. "You have your name, me, your house."

"It is not enough," said Luc in the same tone. "I want, Monseigneur, my own soul."

"Leave that in God's hands," flashed the Marquis.

"It is in my own," answered Luc. "Monseigneur, we have come to this issue, and between us--now--it must be decided. I remember when I was a boy you found me writing and reading. You burnt my books

and papers; you forbade me to make the acquaintance of men of literature; you instilled into me ideas I am scarcely free of yet. But it is no use--I belong to my age, I am one with those men in Paris."

"With Voltaire, atheist, *canaille*."

"With him, Monseigneur."

"My son tells this to me!" cried the old man wildly. "If you want to read books, read the history of your house; you will find them much good company and not one pedant! You will be the first of your race to so disgrace yourself!"

With equal fire and decision Luc answered--

"Nothing can move me. I am what I am. There is only that one thing for me to do. I will not betray my inspiration because I am a man of quality--I would sooner degrade my rank than degrade my spirit."

The Marquis moved back and put out his hand against the chimneypiece. The encroaching shadows began to strengthen in the long, dark chamber; they were over the face of the old noble, these shadows, and gave it a look of hardness, of dreariness, of implacable wrath--a terrible look and a terrible face to be turned on that other marred face opposite, a terrible glance for eyes to dart on those other eyes, half blind, but valiant, that watched patiently.

"There is only one thing for me to do," he said, in bitter mockery of his son's words. "If you mean what you say, if you hold the beliefs you avow, you leave at once and for ever the house of de Clapiers, you will never look on me or your mother again, and you will not obtain from me a single louis if you are starving--as you will starve in your folly and wickedness."

The old clock struck the half-hour. Those same bells had chimed when Luc had first come into his father's presence in his fine uniform and been blessed with proud gladness by the man who was spurning him now.

Luc trembled a little, then sat down.

"I meant," he replied, "all I said, Monseigneur."

"And I also mean what I say."

Luc was silent; his hands fell into his lap. His father remained motionless, erect, hard, grey in the grey shadows. "I must go--even on these terms I must go." His voice was yearning, full of regret, of sorrow, but not of weakness. "Then go--at once."

The young man got to his feet.

"Like--this?"

"At once."

"Monseigneur! "--he held his hands out across the table--"is there nothing in the past that can prevent you from parting so from me--nothing?"

"The present kills the past. You choose to forget your blazon, your quality, your name--you are then nothing to me, I shall forget my eldest son as he has forgotten me."

Luc answered feverishly, desperately--

"Take care, Monseigneur--you will never be able to undo what you do now--never. Think of it--what a difference it would make to me if I had a kind remembrance of you to take with me into the last endeavour of

my life."

"Go--leave my presence. I do not wish to hear your voice."

"My father!"

"Go!"

"Will you hear me?"

"Hear you! What do you think it is to me to hear my *son* speak as you have spoken?"

"Be merciful! Remember I shall never have a child to speak to me--I have nothing but myself."

The Marquis winced and his face quivered.

"You have boasted that before!" he cried.

"No boast," said Luc steadily--"the truth."

"Then on that truth we part. Go to Paris and never think of me again."

Luc stood for a full minute silent.

"I think you mean it," he said at last. "I know I might waste my passion on you. I shall never trouble you any more, Monseigneur."

The shadows gathered with steady swiftness. Luc was reminded of other darkneses: of the retreat from Prague, his journey with Carola to the convent, his parting with Clémence. He put his frail hand over his eyes to shut out the pallid bitterness of his father's face.

"I must see my mother," he said. "I think she would wish to say

farewell."

Without a word the Marquis pulled the long bell rope. Luc heard his quick orders, when the servant appeared--"To beg Madame for her presence."

"Thank you, Monseigneur," he said hoarsely. He seated himself and sank his face in his hands. Were there still depths of anguish, of regret to be sounded? Were there still delicate pangs of pain as yet unknown to him?

He heard the door open. He looked up, to perceive the Marquise entering the room--to perceive her, between his blurred sight and the shadows, very dimly, a gleam of rose-coloured brocade, a flash of brilliants in the fire-glow.

"Madame," said M. de Vauvenargues, in a voice hard and bitter, "I have brought you here to say farewell to your son."

Luc was on his feet. He began to speak--he did not know what he was saying.

"No," interrupted the Marquis.--"Hear me first, Madame."

Madame de Vauvenargues laid her hand on his cuff.

"What has come between you two?" she asked. "Joseph, how is this possible?"

"God and honour have come between us," he answered. "Luc is going to Paris--o--Voltaire--to earn his bread among mountebanks by writing blasphemies. He--a de Clapiers!--he elects to go down into the gutter."

"Hush, Monseigneur, hush!" she implored. "There is some mistake.

Luc, Luc--speak to me--tell me what you wish."

His own voice sounded hollow and weary to him as he answered--

"I am a follower of M. de Voltaire, Madame. I choose to use what life I have left in the profession of letters--I am going to Paris for that purpose."

"You hear!" cried the Marquis--"you hear!"

His wife held herself erect.

"Luc," she said, "you will not persist in this wicked folly."

"Alas!" he answered with great sweetness, "does it seem that to you, my mother?"

"Voltaire!" she murmured.

"Say your farewells," commanded the Marquis fiercely. Luc came slowly round the table, feeling his way by the edge of it.

"You, at least, will not let me go with harsh words," he said unsteadily.

"Tell me one thing!" she flashed--"do you turn your back on God?"

He was beyond all subterfuge. Lies seemed then too flimsy to handle--things that broke at a ouch--only truth was strong enough for his mood.

"On the God of the Gospels, yes," he answered. "But what has that to do with you and me?"

She crossed herself and shrank back against her husband. "You

deny Christ?" she asked, quivering.

"I am speaking to you, mother," he answered passionately. "I am in great need of you, I am very lonely and weak with regrets--give me a kind farewell."

"Do you deny Christ?" she repeated, and clutched her husband's hand.

Luc lurched and caught hold of the back of the settle by the fireplace.

"Shall a dead man come between us?" he asked, and his voice was faint.

"The Living God!" answered his mother.

Luc straightened himself.

"I deny Him--before my own soul I deny Him. If He is more to you than your son--then I go--free--even of your love--free," he laughed. "I cannot see you. Shall I go like this? Mother, does your God let you cast me off like this?"

She stood, taut and cold, at her husband's side.

"I have no more to say to you," she replied. "With great anguish I shall pray for you."

"Is it possible," murmured Luc--"is it possible?" The Marquis spoke now.

"Madame, you have heard for yourself what manner of son we have. I have told him never to think or speak of us again. Was I right?"

She steadied herself against his shoulder.

"Quite--right."

"I have bidden him go to Paris--to never set foot in Aix again. Again, was I right?"

"Quite--right."

"I tell him, before you, to look for no pity, no charity, no recognition from us until he has made his peace with his outraged God. Marguèrite, am I right?"

She replied now in one word--

"Yes."

Luc drew a little broken sigh.

"Farewell," he said.

His father did not answer nor move from his haughty attitude, but his mother said in an awful voice--

"Farewell, and Christ have mercy on you."

He could not see either of them. In moving to the door he stumbled several times against the furniture, for the deep twilight meant utter darkness to his partial blindness.

The two before the fire heard his awkward steps, his fumbling for the handle of the door, and never moved.

When he at last had gone from them utterly, the Marquis caught his wife by the shoulders and looked down into her face.

"Never speak his name to me again," he cried; "never! never!"

V. THE DEPARTURE FROM AIX

Luc sat in a corner of the Paris post-chaise which was driving through the dark away from Aix.

It was over now. He was free of everything; his own master; on his own road to his own goal.

Though, knowing his father, he must have known this utter breach would follow his confession of his faith and belief, yet no previous preparation could soften the pang of the suddenness with which the thing had happened. For years he had been aware that if he spoke what was in his mind his father would be moved to terrible wrath; yet it was none the less awful that he was riding away from Aix, from his home, for ever.

His mother, too. She had let him go with less kindness than he had often seen her show to poor beseechers of charity at her gate.

Jean, his own body-servant, had shrunk from him—he had packed his portmanteaus himself; the other servants had kept out of his way. He seemed to have left the house under a silent curse.

He roused himself; demanded of himself what he was doing brooding on the past. His justification lay in the future. He looked round the interior of the coach, which was full of mist, and shadow, and the wavering light of an oil lamp that hung above the red upholstered worn back of the seat opposite him.

It was a chilly night, the road rough, and progress slow. Luc's weak sight slowly made out the other passengers. His mental preoccupation had been such that till now he had not noticed them.

One, who sat opposite him, under the lamp, was an ordinary middle-aged citizen, wrapped in a frieze coat and wearing a grey wig. He was half asleep, and his head shook to and fro on his breast with the rattling of the coach. The remaining passenger was a woman, so muffled from head to foot in a dark mantle that face, figure, hands, and feet were hidden--probably she was asleep.

Luc had never been in a public coach before. The close smell, the worn fittings, the near presence of strangers--it was all new to him, as were the joltings and lurching in the heavy leathers. He reflected that henceforth all his life would be as strange, as different as this from what he had hitherto known; that from now on he would have to consider things from another standpoint--the soldier, the noble existed no longer. He was a man broken in health, with very little longer to live, adventuring to Paris. He schooled himself to endure the monotony of the cold, the dim light, the two silent figures, the slow motion. He closed his eyes and endeavoured to sleep.

His senses were slipping into a languid, bitter-sweet confusion, when a stinging blast of air roused him. He sat up, shivering and coughing.

The window farthest from him had been opened, and a thin curl of mist, icy cold, entered the coach. The man opposite slept and nodded, and the lady by the open window held her head turned away, and seemed to be gazing out at the darkness.

Luc's courtesy would not permit him to ask her to close the window, though to have it wide to the night in such weather seemed folly.

The cold crept up to him, and clung to him. Recollections of all that cold had meant in his life came to him: the cold in Bohemia; the cold outside Aix; even the delicate chill of evening in the garden off the Rue Deauville.

And all these associations were with Carola Koklinska, and he recalled that she had told him how she used to lie shivering under the trees when she was a child--cold, cold, cold.

Wherever her soul might be, her body was cold now, stiff in the frosty earth. He too, he shivered as he had not under the snows of Purgitz. Again he closed his eyes, yet soon opened them.

Now the window was shut.

He stared, for he had not heard the sound of closing. When he reflected, he had not heard the sound of opening either, nor had the lady changed her attitude--and it was not possible that she could have pulled the thick strap, moved down or up the ponderous frame of wood, the heavy sheet of glass, without some sound, and without disturbing the folds of the cloak across her hands.

Luc admitted to himself, with a little quiver, that his sight was more and more failing him. In these last few weeks he could not trust himself about objects even so near as was this window, that could never have been opened.

He wondered where the cold came from, for it was increasing till every bone ached. Yet his fellow-travellers were quiet. Could it be his fancy conjuring up the past, the snow, the chill--and Carola, Clémence that was? His head sank sideways on his breast, and he fixed his blurred vision on the silent figure of the woman in the corner. Since he could not see her face, he might please himself by imagining it; since he was free to picture her as he would, he might believe she had black hair in long fine ringlets, dark eyes and hollowed cheeks, and a fair throat softly shadowed.

The coach rattled on with cumbrous pace. The lantern flame flared and dipped in the socket; the man in the frieze coat sank huddled

together in a deeper sleep; and the cold became more intense, more searching, till Luc felt as if some creature of ice were embracing him.

Presently, and for the first time, the lady in the corner moved. She did not turn her head from gazing at the darkness, but she drew her hand from under her cloak (that Luc now perceived to be of purple velvet) and laid it on the seat between them.

It was a bare hand, white, and thin, and long.

Luc stared down at this hand, leant forward to bridge the space between them. On the second of the fingers was a diamond ring with sapphire points. Luc had seen a child with such a ring in her shroud buried in the convent graveyard. He drooped against the back of the seat; the hand came nearer, and it seemed to him that his sight suddenly became as perfect as it once had been, for he saw every line and curve and shadow, every tint and crease in the delicate hand creeping closer to him across the worn red velvet of the seat; saw the blue and white sparkle of the stones in the lamplight, and the minute details of their carved silver setting.

She still did not look round. Luc put out his own hand, and the long fingers rested on his. The deep cold increased till he felt that every drop of blood in his body was chilled.

The coach jolted, the lamp shook violently, and the flame sank out; darkness joined the cold. The coach vanished from about Luc; he felt himself being drawn by that icy hand through soft blackness. Cloudy pictures of all he had lost oppressed him: he heard his father's voice, very far off; his mother's last cruel dismissal, coming too from a great distance. He thought he was under the earth, lying in a grave with Carola Koklinska. His own hand was now so cold that he did not know whether or no another was resting in it. A faint Eastern

perfume, luxurious and warm, pervaded the universal cold; a sense of comfort, of delight, stayed the long ache of regret in Luc's heart, as if herbs had been placed on a wound.

He thought he was back in Bohemia, sleeping on the frozen ground, and that presently the dawn would break like a frosty lily, and he would look up to see a lady in a habit of Oriental gaudiness ride round a tall silver fir, in the topmost boughs of which the sun would sparkle among the snow crystals.

But it was another light that broke across the peaceful, grateful darkness that surrounded Luc. He sat up shivering, to find himself in the close, worn interior of a public coach, the door of which was being held open by the guard, who carried a lantern that cast a strong yellow glow.

The coach had sopped. Luc's fellow-passenger was yawning and shaking himself.

"Ah, Messieurs," the guard was saying, "a thousand pardons--the light has gone out!"

"Eh?" yawned the man in the frieze coat. "Well, I think we have both been asleep, have we not, Monsieur?" He smiled courteously at Luc.

"It would seem so," shuddered the Marquis. Beyond the stout figure of the guard, clumsy with heavy capes, he could see the misty lights of an inn, and a group of men standing in front of the yellow square of the door.

"The lady?" he asked. "Has the lady got out here?"

The fellow shook his head.

"There was no passenger save you two from Aix, Monsieur. Some

others join us at the next stage."

Luc glanced at his fellow-traveller, who was chafing his hands vigorously.

"Did you not think that there was a lady in that corner?" he asked faintly.

When he saw the look turned on him, he repented having spoken.

"You have been dreaming, Monsieur," was the brusque answer. "We have been alone in the coach since Aix." Luc controlled himself.

"Forgive me," he said simply, "My sight is not very good, and there were so many shadows I thought I saw a lady in a dark mantle seated in that corner."

The little man laughed.

"Mon Dieu, no, Monsieur." He spoke pleasantly, being affected, almost unconsciously, by the sweetness and gentleness of the slight stooping gentleman who was so terribly marked by the smallpox and seemed to breathe with such an effort.

The guard entered to relight the lantern, and the two travellers descended and stood in the strip of light outside the inn, where the coachman, some peasants, and two starved-looking people, who had been travelling outside, were drinking hot spiced wine with wolfish relish.

Luc felt the night wind ouch his face. He walked out of the radius of light, away from the sound of the talk, and stood facing the dark high road.

Can she, then, come back—has she, then, remembered? Did she

mean to comfort me?

He breathed strongly and drew himself erect.

Why should I fear sorrow and loss? Who am I that I should hope to be free of grief and regret? I have' not offended the Being who put me here, and I fear nothing.

He stood motionless, for the wind was rising higher, and passed him with a sound like the sweep of a woman's skirt. He thought to feel a touch, a breath, to hear a voice, a sigh.

But the wind passed, and a great stillness fell.

Luc returned to the coach.

"Will you not have a glass of wine, Monsieur?" asked the man in the frieze coat. "It is a bitter night for spring."

The Marquis declined pleasantly.

"I suppose we are near the dawn?" he added.

"I think it will be light before the next stage, Monsieur."

They mounted the step, entered, and closed the door. A heavy smell of oil hung in the air, and the lamp burnt raggedly. From without came the clink of glasses and money, voices, and the stamp of feet.

Luc was roused from the exaltation of his inner thoughts by the question--

"How far are you travelling, Monsieur?"

"To Paris."

"Ah, a long way."

"Yes, a long way."

"A fine city, Paris," said the other, pulling on his gloves.

"Fine, indeed, Monsieur."

They took their seats, and the coach started with a noisy effort. The elder traveller was soon asleep again, but Luc sat awake, alert, watching the blurred misty glass turn a cold white as the dawn came slowly.

VI. THE GARRET

When Luc looked from the window of his room across the Isle of St. Louis he realized the great gulf he had set between himself and his past.

The chamber was high up in a tall, straight-fronted house that had once been of some pretensions to splendour, and a man with good vision could have seen a strange array of twisted roofs and chimney-stacks beneath the two dominant towers of Notre-Dame de Paris; and even Luc's ruined sight could discern a vast, if blurred, sweep of houses, sky, and clouds.

Looking down into the street, he could dimly see the dirty house-fronts; the kennels with their up-piled garbage; the poor wine-shop; the people between poverty and draggled fashion, who came and went in this heart of the city that was now so decayed, yet retained still some remnants of splendour; a certain air of being old and royal; a certain pretence of being prosperous and refined; a poor enough pretence, and one fast wearing thin, still there, and sometimes, as on

Sundays, when the small lawyers and men of letters with their ladies walked abroad, worn jauntily enough.

Newly polished swords, newly powdered wigs, gold lace, and hooped petticoats would then grace the rambling streets. Sedan-chairs would cross the cobbles, and sometimes a great man would dash past in a coach and four to one of the hotels the Isle still boasted, where the wit and learning of France gathered occasionally.

Often though, too, this romantic and brave pretence would be abandoned, and the truth stick through, like sharp elbows through a threadbare coat. And bitter penury, and coarse licence, and desperate lawlessness showed openly enough in the narrow streets; and starved faces would be common enough for those who liked to count them, and rebellious talk common enough for those who cared to listen; and people at squalid doorways would curse the war, and taxes, and sometimes the nobles. Even the King did not seem so beloved in these dark streets as he was at Versailles. But the priests, and the tax-gatherers, and the little officials had the people well in hand, and Luc had seen them go, obediently enough, to the church to celebrate a victory--and victories came plentifully.

Maurice de Saxe was handing brilliant laurels to Louis, who wore them gracefully, and pleased France, it seemed. For France endured the Marquise de Pompadour and certain creatures of hers, such as the brothers Paris, Devernay, and others who flourished and fattened, and used the country like a pot of gold, into which they could dip their fists and enrich themselves, under the cynical approval of the melancholy King.

Luc saw France differently from this poor quarter. Paris had seemed another city viewed from the Rue du Bac. The war had been different, too, viewed in the light of the gala lamps of Versailles, or by

the camp fires of Bohemia.

There was no glory to gild these humble lives, no hope, no lure to lead them on. Luc watched, and was troubled. Could France flower from such a soil? Would the light of the coming age of freedom ever overcome the dark windings of the religion of Pompadour and peasant, ever dissipate the errors taught by the ignorant to the ignorant, by dirty priests to sullen minds?

Luc watched the sky at evening. That was as pure, as remote, as golden above the stale odours of the crooked streets as above the uncouth fields of Provence. And he dared to hope that the golden age was coming.

For himself, he did not wince from the ignoble melancholy of his surroundings. His poverty did not trouble him, nor had he once regretted the impulse that had driven him from home. He was living on about five francs a day. His money, that had come from the sale of what was left of his personal property after the expenses of the war, would, at this rate, last him three years, and he did not think to live so long. Indeed, his weakness increased so on him, his attacks of illness were so frequent and severe, that he often thought it might be weeks only before the end.

Sometimes he would lie all day alone on his poor bed, gazing up at the strip of sky, unable to move or sleep, smiling at the sunshine which, towards evening (the hour he loved the most), would dazzle over his bare boards like the skirts of Glory herself.

When his strength was with him, he wrote. Many of his papers were with his brother Joseph, who had once shown a furtive interest in them. Luc sent a noble letter asking for them, but received no reply. He smiled, thinking of the furious Joseph casting the manuscripts into the fire.

Such as he had in his own possession, and those his solitary meditations had produced, he collected, and sent to one of the great booksellers.

The work was taken. For the sake of those who had disowned him, Luc made the last sacrifice, and the modest little volume appeared without any name on the title-page.

It made no success whatever, fell dead from its birth, and was forgotten. No one made any remark upon it, for no one read it.

"They would say I was a complete failure," smiled Luc.

He sent a copy of his book to M. de Voltaire, with some timidity, for the great man was now historiographer to the Court and deep in politics, being the acknowledged protégè of the Marquise; and then, with the slow, painful effort of his infirmities, he commenced to write another. He had so elevated himself that he was not even disappointed by the failure of the book that contained the inmost convictions of his soul. He saw now that glory was not only reached by the road of success.

Six months after he had come to Paris, and a few days after he had sent his book to Voltaire, one fair, clear afternoon in October, he sat at his window, overlooking Paris. It seemed to him that he overlooked the future too; that this window of his poor room was the outlook of some watch-tower, from which he could see the doings of posterity unfold into the distance.

Wars and ministries, kings and soldiers, shrank to the size of puppet-shows viewed on the fringe of the changing future. Soon, everything that agitated the world now would be a mere name. Soon again--not even that--fresh creeds, fresh codes, would replace the old; and through all the changing dynasties of thought that would

reign, nothing would count but the memory of the few men who had risen above their age, and handed from one generation to another the pure lamp of the truth as it had been revealed to them; of virtue, as it had been permitted to them to practise; of heroism, as they had been able to accomplish it.

It was easier on the battle-field or in the Cabinet, but it was possible in a garret. It was easier with a body vigorous and healthy; it was possible with a body broken and dying. It was easier when surrounded by encouragement, attention, acclaim; but it was possible, alone and unnoticed, to win a place in that galaxy of glory that lights eternity.

Luc had on his window-sill an evergreen plant with gold leaves, straight and tall in shape, like the silver fir of Bohemia, or the poplars of the Rue Deauville.

He opened the window now, and moved the pot, and admired the glint of the sun on the glossy leaves. The sight of this little plant, so strong, so silent, gave him an extraordinary sensation--it was so noble in its intense life, and yet so helpless. Luc sometimes felt abashed before the gold foliage rising out of the common pot on the dirty sill.

He thought now that the soil felt dry, and turned to get water. In that moment the door opened and a man stepped into the room.

"Who are you, Monsieur?" asked Luc pleasantly. The other swept off his hat.

"Do you not know me, Monsieur le Marquis?"

Luc strained his eyes.

"Come a little nearer. Ah!"--as the other obeyed--"Monsieur de

Richelieu!"

"Yes."

The Duke glanced round the plaster walls, the rafted ceiling, the shabby furniture. Then his bold dark eyes rested on the meagre figure of Luc, clothed in garments still too good for his surroundings, and he flushed, and a shade came over his broad low brow.

"Do you live here?" he asked.

"Yes, Marèchal."

Luc indicated a chair, and M. de Richelieu seated himself. The splendour of his velvets, laces, brilliants, and all his extravagant appointments, looked strange enough in this room. His charming face was red between the flowing curls, and he gazed at Luc with an expression of amazement.

"Yesterday," he said, "M. de Voltaire brought your book to the Hotel d'Antin, and I was reading it last night. Good God—a man of your quality! I wish you could have accepted the Spanish appointment."

Luc seated himself on the low chair by the hearth, on which a few sticks were burning.

"I wished so also," he said quietly. "But you see for yourself, Monseigneur, that my health would not permit."

The Marèchal seemed unable to find words.

Luc leant forward and narrowed his weak eyes.

"Have you come to offer me patronage, Monsieur?" he asked.

The Duke answered with a noble air--

"It would not be possible for anyone to offer M. de Vauvenargues patronage. I heard from M. de Voltaire that you were here, and I came to be instructed in philosophy."

"A Marèchal de France comes to be instructed in philosophy in a garret!" smiled Luc; "and from one with whom he discovered long since that he had nothing in common!"

The Duke looked down at his open hand, that he lightly struck with his gauntlet, which was heavily embroidered with wreaths of roses, of gold ribbon, and of violets.

"We have something in common," he said--"Madame la Comtesse Koklinska."

Luc rose and leant against the mean mantelshelf.

"Yes, we have that memory in common," he answered calmly.

"When did you see her last?" asked the Duke.

"She is dead," said Luc, looking at him.

M. de Richelieu glanced up swiftly. There was a curious sense of stillness in the room. When the Duke spoke, his tone was also low.

"When did she die?"

"In a convent in Aix--nearly a year ago. So you did not know?"

"But I might have guessed that no other reason would have prevented her from coming back."

"If she had lived, M. de Marèchal, she would never have come back. She died in the habit of a novice."

"Ah--well, after all, that is what they all do. Did she speak of me?"

"She said, Monsieur, you had done--what they all do."

M. de Richelieu laughed softly.

"She was a clever woman. I never knew her deceived. She was, in her way, quite marvellous. But I did not come to speak of her."

"No, Monsieur, but to look on a curiosity, I suppose?"

M. de Richelieu rose to his feet with a shimmer of his violet watered silks, and said a curious thing.

"Are you--with the world forgone--happy?" he asked.

Luc looked over the house-tops at the setting sun that glittered over the roofs of the Isle of St. Louis.

"Yes," he answered. He coughed, put his hand to the plain linen ruffles on his bosom, and sat down again in the worn chair.

"And yet you have lost everything!" exclaimed the Marèchal.

"I keep my soul," smiled Luc; and his pallid, disfigured face glowed for a second into its old likeness.

"I have my soul," said the Marèchal, "and all the world besides. What have you that I have not?"

"Nothing, maybe," replied Luc gravely.

"Ah," insisted the Court favourite, "you have the power to come and live--like this." His superb gesture was as if he indicated a kennel. "You have the power to sacrifice things that must be sweet to you. What inspires you?"

"The love of glory, Monsieur," smiled Luc. "Call it that. But what is the use of words? My life marches to a different music from yours."

"Do you despise me?" asked the Marèchal quickly, eagerly.

Luc considered a moment before he lifted his head and answered quietly

"I think I do."

"So M. de Voltaire says sometimes; but he is not a man of quality. I thought you despised me when we first met. Why?"

"You had such great opportunities," answered Luc.

"I have made great use of them. There is no one more powerful in France, except La Pompadour."

"That is a proud boast," said the Marquis. "I recommend it for your epitaph, Monsieur le Marèchal."

The Duke put his hand swiftly to the gold lace on his bosom.

"You hold me in contempt," he said, with a fine smile, "but I can feel no scorn for you. How do you do it?"

Luc lifted his head.

"Are you so discontented with your own life that you must come prying into mine?" he said evenly. "You have what you wanted. Be

satisfied, as I am."

M. de Richelieu's face paled with a sudden passion.

"There is *nothing* can satisfy me! I begin to find the world very stale, so much of it is foolish. But *you* seem to have found something new. Tell me, for I no longer see anything gilded in all the world. There is a tarnish over the gold pieces, and over the women's hair--and both were bright enough to me once."

Luc leant forward, and with a bent poker stirred the fire into a sparkle of embers.

"I fear, Monsieur le Marèchal," he said, "that you begin to grow old."

The Duke laughed.

"Old!" he repeated. "Old!" He rose. "My God! do you think I am *old*? Look at me, Monsieur--am I *old*?"

Luc turned his head towards him.

"I can scarcely see you at all," he said serenely. "I only see something gold and purple. I am, Monsieur, half blind."

The Duke stared at him.

"If I was stricken like you, I would fall on my sword!" he exclaimed impulsively.

"Each has his own courage," replied Luc.

"How long will you stay here?" asked the Marèchal abruptly.

"Until I die, Monsieur."

"By Heaven, no. Come to the Hotel d'Antin. You are a great man. Since I am growing old I need a philosopher at my side, and--I always liked you, Luc de Vauvenargues."

The Marquis rose.

"I suppose it was you who obtained me the Spanish appointment after all?" he asked suddenly.

"Do you bear me malice for that?"

"No," said Luc, "no. But I am glad that I have chosen a way where I can walk unaided."

"Will you come to the Hotel d'Antin?"

"Monseigneur, this time I have not come to Paris to become a pensioner of the great."

This answer, spoken with pride, but sweetly, caused the blood to flush to M. de Richelieu's side curls.

"So my philosopher rejects me!" he cried. "And I have prostrated myself at the feet of the wise man without learning the secret of perpetual youth or happiness! Farewell, Monsieur de Vauvenargues."

He bowed and stepped towards the door. When he had opened it he paused with the latch in his hand.

"Where is she buried?" he asked.

Luc did not answer.

"I mean La Koklinska," insisted the resplendent Marèchal.

"In our hearts," answered the Marquis swiftly. "Let her lie at peace."

"Your pardon," said M. de Richelieu. "I would have dedicated something to her memory."

"You can, Monsieur--your silence."

The Duke bowed again.

"My silence, then, until we three meet in the Elysian Fields, when we shall be able to have an interesting conversation. Again, and till then, farewell."

"Farewell, Monsieur le Marèchal."

The door closed on the gorgeous courtier, and Luc was alone as usual in the cold, darkening room, with the fire sinking on the hearth and the sun fading without over the roofs of Paris.

VII. THE ROSES OF M. MARMONTEL

Luc stood again on the bridge, leaning on the parapet, and watching the river and the people passing to and fro.

It was midsummer of the year '46, and unusually hot. Most of the women wore roses--red, white, and pink. There were many boats on the river, and an air of gay carelessness over Paris; yet the war had not been so brilliantly successful of late. The English mastery of the seas was ruining commerce, and the Saxon troops were marching on Provence. The taxes were heavier than ever, and starved faces and bitter tongues more frequent in the poorer quarters where Luc lived.

If anyone had remarked a slim young noble, richly dressed, looking with earnest eyes at the river from this old bridge of St. Germain some three years ago, and had happened to pass this spot now, they would not have recognized that graceful figure in the prematurely aged man in the shabby clothes who leant heavily against the parapet, whose face was so disfigured and expressionless, who wore no sword, but helped himself with a black cane.

But Luc de Clapiers was happier than he had been when last he mused above the Seine. As his body fell into decay and painful feebleness his spirit seemed to mount more and more triumphantly. Sometimes he felt as if he held all the thought of all the world in the hollow of his hand; as if he soared above and beyond his age with the great immortals who rule over eternity. In his dreams he beheld most beautiful landscapes; when he lay down on his bed vistas opened up of strange and gorgeous countries, exquisite almost beyond bearing, and a path would run from the bare boards of his garret straight to the heart of some woodland that dipped to uncharted seas of delight.

Music came from a boat that passed beneath the bridge; the sound of it across the water was tremblingly sweet to Luc's ears. He thought there was something sublime and sad in the notes; that there was a message in them that no human voice could convey.

He straightened himself against the parapet, then went on his way. At the corner of the bridge he met a beggar woman dragging a child. She cast an appealing glance at Luc, who paused, fumbled a silver coin from his pocket, and gave it her. The action reminded him that he had only a few gold pieces left in the world. He had planned his resources to last twice as long, but it had been easy to deny himself everything but charity. That it was not in his nature to forgo, nor were the instincts of a life at a moment to be altered. He never chaffered, and therefore paid double what every one else did in the Isle.

Last winter the man who lived in the room opposite his, a clarionet player at the Opera, had been ill, and Luc had paid to prevent the fellow being turned into the street, paid the expenses of his short illness, and finally his humble funeral.

For his book he had received nothing. For the next edition that he was revising, with the advice of M. de Voltaire, he also expected to receive nothing. He had friends,--Voltaire himself, Saint Vincent, and others,--but the noble blood in him prevented him from ever considering their possible assistance. He could only think of writing pamphlets, or doing translations; but he knew little Greek or Latin, and only a scanty Italian.

As he returned home through the sunny streets he recalled his father's words: "Not a louis from me, if you are starving--as, in your folly and wickedness, you will starve."

He thought of his parents, of Joseph, and Aix, with great tenderness. He was glad he had resisted the bookseller's entreaty to put his name to his book, even though by his refusal he had probably lost a good chance of ensuring the success of his labour; for he had spared the proud old aristocrat the shame of seeing his name on the title-page of a work of philosophy; of hearing his name associated with Voltaire, with literature, with poverty, with the ignominy of writing and printing a book.

"He would say," thought Luc, "how right he was--what an utter failure I am."

He opened the door of his room, and entered with great weariness. The stairs, steep and dark, fatigued him immensely. The garret, being directly under the roof, was suffocatingly hot. He felt his head ache and his limbs tremble. The food placed for him on the table

near the window he turned from, though the little girl who waited on him had arranged glass and plate, salad and meat, black bread, and thin wine in a tall bottle, neatly enough.

On this same table lay a bundle of proofs tried round with a twist of twine.

Luc took them up, balanced them in his hand, and put them down again. He was only able to read them with great difficulty.

"After all," he mused, with a melancholy smile, "perhaps they *are* worth nothing--who knows?"

He sat very still, considering what he was to do for money. The people he was dealing with were poor. He could not bear the thought of being in their debt, or of asking them for any kindness that he could not reward. He reflected that it cost something even to die decently, and he might live some time longer. He smiled to think that he was balancing the probable length of his life against the probable length of his purse, and at the reflection that a hundred pistoles would put him out of all anxiety. His sweet humour took the whole thing with a laugh.

Presently he went to the window. A foul, stale smell was rising from the old winding street. Dirty, sharp-faced children played in the brilliant patch of sunshine that fell between two decayed houses and stained the cobbles.

At the doorless entrances dishevelled women stood talking, and gathered round the wine-shop were a few men of a better sort, with their shirts open for the heat, who emptied their glasses silently, then went about their business, silently also. Luc's feeble sight could make out none of this, nor did he look down, but across the irregular roofs to the ineffable glory of the gold and purple August sky.

He put his hands on the sill; the stinging heat of it was grateful to his chill blood. He closed his eyes, and felt the sunshine like a red sword across his lids. He leant his sick head against the mullions. The clock of a church near by struck four; it reminded him that this was the hour and the day when he was generally visited by Voltaire or one of his friends--Diderot, d'Alembert, Saint Vincent. Luc loved these men, as he could not fail to love those whose warm regard was sweetening his closing years, but he would not live their lives. The Pompadour was their patroness, and they lived on that corruption that they secretly laughed at. Luc could not ever have brought himself to kneel at the footstool of the Marquise; his pure integrity, his absolute independence, and his complete obscurity divided him as sharply as his birth from the group of brilliant men to whom by right of genius he belonged.

All of these men had achieved success; combined, they made a power equal to that of the ancient royalty itself. They were preparing--in the Encyclopaedia to which they were devoting their enthusiasm, their gifts of logic, of reason, of sarcasm, of eloquence--thunderbolts that would shake God Himself. Yet they one and all agreed to honour the unknown young aristocrat whose austere philosophy condemned half their actions, but whose sweetness and heroism won their admiration and respect.

M. de Voltaire came to Luc's chamber this blazing afternoon, and not alone. He brought with him a young man, very splendidly attired, with a fine ardent face and bold eyes, full of an eager, joyous life. M. de Voltaire presented him briefly--

"M. le Marquis--M. Marmontel."

Luc caught the young man's hand, and drew him gently into the sunlight, straining his half-blind eyes to make out the person of his visitor.

For Jean Francois Marmontel was the favourite of Paris, petted, caressed, extolled; the incarnation of success; one young, vigorous, and in the seat of glory; one physically what Luc had been before the Bohemia war, and from the worldly point of view in that position Luc had so yearned and longed for, so confidently hoped to attain.

Luc had failed in arms, in politics, in letters. He had lost love, and health, and all hope of material triumph. He had even won hate from those nearest to him in blood. He was dying, slowly, and in a fashion humiliating. He was disfigured, feeble, half blind, bowed with weakness and great pain.

M. de Voltaire thought of this as he watched him looking so earnestly at the young man who was so crowned with gifts, with success, strength, and vigour.

M. Marmontel wore roses like the women who had passed to and fro the Pont St. Germain--sweet-smelling red roses, thrust into the black velvet ribbon that fastened the long lace ends of his cravat. His bright, sparkling brown hair was tied with a blue velvet knot; his white waistcoat was flourished with wreaths of flowers in many colours; his face was slightly flushed under the eyes that were fixed on the man before him, with a look of mingled humility, apprehension, and self-confidence, only to be seen in the faces of the very youthful and very happy.

Luc, with painful, laboured searching, made out these details. His grasp tightened on the straight young fingers.

"I congratulate M. Marmontel from the depths of my heart," he said. And his voice was so soft, so sweet, so sincere that the man to whom he spoke gave a slight start. He was expecting another voice from this frail, ill creature.

"What does it feel like," continued Luc, in the same warm ones, "to be *young* and *famous*? To have achieved so soon?"

"Monseigneur, you overwhelm me," answered the young author frankly.

Luc smiled. His scarred face--the delicate traits of which had been so for ever ruined--changed with this smile in such a fashion--inexpressible, but not to be ignored--that M. Marmontel, with a sense of shock, knew he was in the presence of something very rare and beautiful, and his own achievement seemed a crude thing.

"I have done nothing," he said. "I hope some day--but at present--nothing, Monsieur."

He lowered his eyes, confused.

The low, sweet, aristocrats's voice answered

"You must not undervalue yourself, nor your great rewards. I am grateful you found time to come here." He gave a little gesture round the miserable room, a gesture that was the man of quality's dismissal of his surroundings. And indeed M. Marmontel, though used to the most splendid hotels of Paris, had forgotten the garret from the moment Luc had spoken.

M. de Voltaire began to talk: of the great world; of the world of letters; of the world beyond Paris, beyond France; of the future, and the great changes that were coming with a swiftness almost terrible. But for once Luc was not listening to the speech of M. de Voltaire; he was looking tenderly, lovingly, at the favourite of fortune, the man in the flush of his youth and fame, the man who had won glory at the first effort.

He thought of d'Espagnac and de Seytres--of how beautiful and ardent they had been, and how forgotten they were in their foreign graves--and his soul rushed back to his own early youth and his opening dreams. This man had realized his--this man had everything gorgeous in the world before him; he was modest and fine, but his extraordinary sense of triumph was betrayed in his clear laugh. He laughed often at M. de Voltaire's remarks. No shade of envy or even of regret touched Luc. He did not think of himself at all; only he felt a little wonder at the thought of the two young officers whom he had so loved.

"Surely they too were worthy to be crowned," he thought wistfully. And his heart swelled as he recalled Hippolyte dying in the hospital, and Georges in the snow.

When the two rose to take their leave, Luc, after his farewells to M. de Voltaire, laid a wasted hand on the younger man's soft satin sleeve.

"Monsieur," he said, with his unconquerable air of the great gentleman, "I have not held any roses in my hand since I came to Paris--seeing yours reminded me. Might I ask them of you--to remember you by, when you are gone?"

M. Marmontel unfastened the red blooms without a word, and held them out.

"Thank you," smiled Luc. "You have honoured me. I give you all my good wishes--that your genius may make you happy as it has made you great."

The young man did not answer. He seemed abashed. When they had gone, Luc went to the table and put the flowers beside the proofs of his book.

The sun was near the setting, but the room was still brilliant with ruddy light.

Luc stood quite still, his hands resting on the edge of the table. He closed his eyes and bent his head.

"Is there no charm to bring any of you back?" he asked, in a low voice. "For a moment? You *know* now. Come back to me, dear. There is nothing in the way now, nothing. You know I am lonely, do you not?"

He swayed a little against the table, and set his teeth. "Come back; come--*back*."

He sank on his knees, and rested his face against the wand-bottomed chair.

"I love you--is it not strong enough? Come--*back*."

For a while he shivered in the summer silence of the dying afternoon, and his blood ran passionately in his tired body.

Then he lifted his swimming head, and fumbled for the roses that had been worn by the man who was happy, and loved, and young, and famous,--the man who had everything he had hoped to have, and was everything that he had hoped to be,--and he laid the petals to his lips, and presently wept into their hearts, because he too was young, and some things that were dead could not be forgotten, and some hopes that were unfulfilled and some desires that were unsatisfied could not be for ever silenced.

VIII. THE END OF THE QUEST

On a pale, bitter day in the following spring, Luc de Clapiers made his way with a steady, purposeful slowness to a certain house in the Isle where there was a garden. It was the hotel of some nobleman, neglected and shut up. The garden was neglected too, but there was grass in it, green now, and two trees, just beginning to be flushed with leaves that crossed their boughs before the shuttered windows and closed doors.

In the centre of this garden was a fountain, broken and dried up. The basin was grey with dead moss, and in the centre rose a defaced figure with a pitying face and a bare bosom girdled beneath with drapery, in the folds of which the little birds nested.

Luc, when he reached this spot, leant against the high rusty iron railings, and stared at the grass and the two trees.

He was fatigued and hungry. A week ago his recent means of support had been taken from him. During the winter he had earned his living as a bookseller's hack, by writing prefaces, by indexing, by correcting proofs, even by copying letters and delivering books. The work threatened him with utter blindness. He began to make many mistakes. At last another man was put in his place, and Luc was at a loss indeed.

He had some time since taken a cheaper room, and he had sold everything he could sell.

Yesterday, to pay the debt he owed for his poor lodging, he had parted with what he would not have sold for bread--what he had hoarded jealously so long--his sword: the sword his father had given him before he went to the war; a beautiful weapon of Toledo steel, with shell and quillons inlaid with gold.

Half the price of it lay in Luc's pocket, and this money caused him the

first sensation of shame he had known in his life. He held on to the railings to steady himself, and looked at the peaceful enclosure of the ruined garden.

His great dread was that he might live long enough to become an object of M. de Voltaire's charity. He had winced from nothing yet, but he did wince from that.

The second version of his book had been for long refused on account of the ill success of the first. After many endeavours, a bookseller had been at last persuaded to take it; but there remained a good deal to be done before the sheets were ready for the press, and Luc was too ill to write.

"I must finish that," he kept saying to himself. "I must finish that."

The fresh bare boughs, through which two little birds were flying, the long blades of grass moving slightly to and fro in the wind, even the noble lines of the empty house and the calm face of the broken statue, soothed Luc.

"Why should I trouble about any of it?" he asked himself. "Once I am dead, I shall so soon forget it all."

He returned to the squalid little street, the miserable house where he lodged, and climbed to his room, which was dark and scarcely furnished at all. The narrow window looked blankly on the house opposite. There was no view, even over roofs, and the sun only entered for a brief while at early dawn.

Luc, coughing painfully, latched the door, and feebly made his way to the table that stood beside the mattress on which he slept. He put his hand in his pocket, took out the money, and laid it, a little pile of silver pieces, on the table.

"Should I die to-night, I suppose that would be enough to bury me," he said to himself, with a little smile.

A cry filled the room as water fills a glass into which it is flung suddenly--rang round and round walls and ceiling--

"Luc! Luc! *Luc!*"

The Marquis turned in slow bewilderment; he dimly saw the figure of a man advancing from the window.

"I have been waiting for you," said this person, in a terribly moved voice.

"Who are you?" asked Luc. He knew nothing, save that this was not one of his friends.

"Who am I? Do you not know me?"

"No--yet--"

"Can you not see me?"

"I can see very little--hardly at all. I know your voice."

"I am Joseph de Clapiers."

Luc made a step backward. His face, that had seemed utterly bloodless, was suddenly stained with a great flush of colour.

"I am sorry you have come," he said. His thought was that it would have been better, far better, if he could have died before any of his family, or indeed anyone connected with his old life, had seen him in what must to them be degradation unspeakable.

"How did you find me?" he asked. He endeavoured, with the rising yearning of old affection, to make out his brother's face, but Joseph stood too far from him. To Luc he was featureless.

"Some one I know heard a man called Marmontel speak of you. I traced you through that. They told me here that this was your room, and I waited for you." He spoke in a controlled, though harsh and strained voice. After that first fierce cry he had gained command of himself.

"I am sorry you came," repeated Luc, with quiet sweetness. "We had no farewell in Aix, but you would have kept a more pleasant memory of me if you had not come. Will you not sit down?" he added. He himself sank into the rough wood chair by the table; indeed, his limbs were shaking so that he could not stand.

Joseph came near enough for Luc to see his fresh comeliness; near enough for them to touch each other, and for the elder to divine the wrath and horror in the face of the younger. He suddenly saw himself as if a mirror hung before him, and the blood again swept his face.

"Why did you come?" he asked under his breath.

Joseph stared at him cruelly. Luc no longer bore any sign or mark of a gentleman. He wore a clumsy grey coat, worn, and a little frayed at the cuffs; his waistcoat, which was of a dingy yellow colour, was stained with ink; his neckcloth was coarse, though newly washed and folded neatly; his stockings were thick and woollen, his shoes heavy. He wore no wig, and his hair was long again, and tied with a black ribbon, but colourless and grey about the front, as if it had been powdered. Joseph marked the absence of sword, watch, and ring. He did not mark the fine freshness of the rough attire, nor reflect on the effort this decent cleanliness meant to the man who lived alone, half blind, and in such poverty.

"My father!" he murmured. "My father!"

"Did he send you?" asked Luc.

"No."

"Has he ever spoken of me?"

"No."

"Nor my mother?"

"No."

"You--think they are right?"

"Yes."

"Why are you here?" asked Luc patiently.

"Because," was the fierce answer, "I cannot endure a de Clapiers to die in a hospital, and be buried at the expense of public charity."

The elder brother lifted his ruined face and smiled. "What do you want of me?" he asked.

"You must come to my hotel--"

Luc interrupted.

"You cannot coax back when dying the man you have cast out," he said gently. "Nor would it soothe your pride if he should expire on your hearth. You think I am disgraced, accursed. You perhaps even hate me."

"I think I do," breathed Joseph heavily.

Luc rose.

"Then leave me. I have so little time left for anything; none at all for hate. I want to die alone. Go your way, Joseph. When I left Aix something broke that is past mending."

"I think the Devil possesses you," cried Joseph. "But you are Luc de Clapiers, and you shall not live in beggary among the scum of Paris."

"I *am* Luc de Clapiers," replied the Marquis--"remember it. I am not what I look, but what I was born: a gentleman of quality, who upholds his own honour--as well here as in Aix, as well here as in Bohemia. Be content; I shall not disgrace you."

Joseph half laughed.

"Disgrace! I think you deny God?"

"And the Devil--and all you believe, perhaps, Joseph,"--his voice had an exalted yet tender note,--"but maybe I shall sleep well just the same in my unconsecrated grave."

The younger man stepped back, clenched his strong right hand, and struck his breast.

"For the honour of our nobility, for the respect you once bore our mother, in the name of the God you outrage, I conjure you come with me. Let a priest shrive you--"

Luc broke in with a sudden flash of vitality.

"Do you think I am going to be false to all I believe--now? Now,"--he dropped into his chair again; his strength was slipping from him, but

he beat the words out with a great labour of his breath,—"now--when I have--so nearly won?"

"You! You who have failed in everything you have undertaken!"

Luc put a thin, trembling hand on the book--a small humble volume--and the loose sheets of paper lying on the table.

"I have administered to the truth within me," he said, and, still keeping his hand on the book, he forced himself to raise his head, that had sunk, through sheer bodily weakness, into his bosom, until he looked his brother in the face.

"You have dishonoured a noble house," said Joseph hoarsely; "and I shall never forgive you, dead or living."

"Ah!" answered Luc softly, regretfully. "The pity of such words as those!" His head drooped a little again.

"The pity," he added wistfully, "of all our fierce passions, our curses, our hatreds, our wrongs to one another, when there is so little any of us can do, and so little time to do it in. And we waste our few chances. Do not hate me--Joseph. I shall always love you."

The younger brother was silent. It might be his heart prompted him to forgive; that old affection stirred. But the wrong against his religion, his pride, his order was too strong; the offences he raged against were unforgivable; the wrath, the disgust, the shame he had nourished in his heart since Luc's departure from Aix were rather fanned than mollified by the sight of the dying man who had aroused these emotions.

Luc took advantage of his silence to speak again.

"Since you *have* come, Joseph," he said, "let us part in friendship.

We are the two last of our family, and--after all--that is something."

"Will you leave this?" demanded the younger man, not kindly, but with a suppressed violence. "Will you come with me?"

"No," replied Luc. "This is my place now. And it is easier for me to refuse you, Joseph, because I know that pride, not love, asks this."

"Pride!" echoed Joseph. "*You* have the damnable pride of the Devil. You prefer your garret--your accursed book "--he snatched the thin volume from under Luc's frail fingers, and cast it on the ground--"your outcast friends--to your family, your honour, your home."

The Marquis made a faint gesture of sorrow and protest. "This is not needful," he murmured. But Joseph's vigorous voice overbore his feeble ones.

"Very well, then," he continued; "die in the miserable loft your dishonourable conduct has brought you o, and leave us to endure your disgrace--as we have endured it since you left Aix!"

Luc got to his feet again, and stood holding on to the edge of the table.

"You will be able to blot me from your annals very completely soon," he said. "When I am dead, no one will speak of me, and you can forget."

He lifted his hand and let it fall. The little pile of silver pieces was knocked over by the gesture, and the money rolled across the floor to the feet of the younger brother.

"Is this Voltaire's charity?" he cried.

Luc lifted his head, and smiled.

"No. I sold my sword this morning. So you see I can pay for my own coffin, Joseph."

He sat down again and hid his face in his two hands, as if he was greatly fatigued, and wished to compose his thoughts. There was a dignity about this movement and pose, as if he had withdrawn himself into final silence. Joseph had no more weapons; his wrath flared impotently. He stared fiercely at his brother, and set his scarlet heel on the book he had flung on the floor; then, in white haughtiness and bitter speechlessness, left the garret.

"I am tired," said Luc to himself; "tired--tired."

He dropped his hands, and rose and looked round for the crushed volume Joseph had spurned with his foot. As he stooped to pick it up he heard a soft yet swelling crash of music.

"Soldiers," he murmured, "going to the--war."

The music gathered in strength until it culminated in an almost intolerable crescendo of passionate exaltation. It seemed to be very near, almost in the room. Luc found himself on his knees, quivering in the sound of it. The music began to paint pictures in the garret, and Luc's blindness did not prevent his seeing them: gorgeous banners draped the bare rafters, and a procession with flags, shields, and drums crossed the humble floor, and broke away the mean walls, and let in the great clouds and the strong sunbeams, and showed a vast span of pure light that dazzled into the infinite distance.

A company with sublime tread was passing over this bridge, and they smiled at Luc.

He felt the clouds closing round him and the light enveloping him. One of the martial figures was a woman who looked at him with royal

eyes.

Luc rose. He felt himself straight and strong. He held out his arms towards the rolling golden clouds that entered through the broken walls, towards the procession that crossed the arc of light.

"O God of mine, whom I have laboured not to offend, take me back whence I came!" he cried.

As he spoke, he felt himself drawn into the company with the flags and swords, and with immortal light on his face he set his foot on the end of the dazzling arc.

* * *

M. de Voltaire, that evening, found him lying across the floor, with his head on his book, his right hand where his sword should have been, and the silver pieces scattered about him sparkling in the cold spring moonlight that fell through the high, open garret window.

EPILOGUE

A girl in a straight white muslin gown, and a cap with green ribbons, was seated on the brim of a fountain in the garden of a house in Aix, listening dutifully to an old man, who, with the self-absorption of extreme age, was talking of the past in a low, slightly fretful voice. Clémence de Fortia disguised a wandering attention. She had a letter in the bosom of her gown that she wished to read and re-read in private—a letter from a young deputy in Paris, full of the wonders, the scandals, the terrors of these last years of the century and first years of the French Republic.

It was midsummer, and the garden was knee-deep in flowers, all coloured by the sun and shaken by the warm breeze. The old man

sat on a wicker chair under the tree that shaded the fountain with a rug about his knees. He must have been over eighty years of age, and he was dressed in the fashion of that period that was now completely over, and in the style of that aristocracy that had lately fallen, terribly and for ever.

"Your grandmother was betrothed to my elder brother once, Mademoiselle Clémence," he said, taking up his broken talk after a pause.

"Why, I did not know that you ever had a brother, Monsieur," she answered, interested.

A look of distress and regret passed over the fine old face.

"He died fifty years ago," he murmured, "in Paris--in the arms of M. de Voltaire. Fifty years! I have lived too long."

"Ah, no!" smiled the young girl brightly. "The times have been very terrible, but I cannot help thinking that all is very new and glorious now."

"Your grandmother would never have said that." The old Marquis de Vauvenargues fixed her with sad eyes. "But you are a child of your generation, despite the blood in your veins."

"Things have changed so!" she said, humouring him.

"Ah, yes!--things have changed!" he repeated. And his chin sank on the lace ruffles on his breast. "I meant that when I said I had lived too long. I should have wished to die before I saw the things I have seen in France."

Clémence de Fortia laid her warm pink fingers over his dry white hands.

"I know," she said. "But here we escaped the worst; and--somehow--" She paused; she was thinking of the letter near her heart. What did changing dynasties matter after all, was her reflection, when the essential things were the same? Aloud she finished her sentence with a smile: "It is so pleasant in the garden, Monsieur, that I cannot help being happy!"

The old man smiled also, but his eyes were dim with memories.

"Here is my father!" cried Mademoiselle de Fortia, springing to her feet. "And you will want to talk to him!"

She ran across the sunny grass to meet a man of middle age, dressed in the fashion of the Revolution.

"M. de Vauvenargues is sad to-day," she whispered. "I tried to comfort him, but he is so very, very old. And I have heard from Paris." She blushed defiantly.

"What do they say in Paris?" asked the Marquis de Fortia.

"They say General Bonaparte is going to marry Madame de Beauharnais. But she is not young, and he is quite well thought of, is he not?"

"I will relieve you of your post," smiled her father. "Go and read your gossip, child."

She laughed, and ran away into the rose garden with her hands at her bosom.

M. de Fortia went to the old man, who was staring before him at the water that dripped by the river deity into the basin of the fountain from the mouth of the urn. He looked up as his friend approached, and

said abruptly, in his high voice--

"Do you think Voltaire. a great man?"

"Certainly--one of the greatest."

"He thought my brother had genius."

"Your brother?"

"My elder brother--" He paused, seemed to make an effort of memory. "Luc--yes, his name was Luc. I have not spoken that name for half a hundred years. Luc--I believe we were fond of each other. He used to--write."

He nodded at the fountain.

"Well, I have his manuscripts and his book upstairs. I thought of them last night. I am an old man, and the last of a family that has been very proud, as you know, my friend, very proud."

He paused again.

"But perhaps, when I am dead, our name will not suffer--in these days--when things are so different, and who is to remember us?" His voice sank, and an expression of profound melancholy clouded his face.

"What do you wish me to do?" asked M. de Fortia, bending over him.

The last of the de Clapiers drew a key from his pocket, and presented it with a trembling hand.

"You will find the box in my desk. When I am dead, publish my

brother's writings--with his name. We used to think he had disgraced our blazon; but now--perhaps--his book might even keep alive--in the new era coming--the noble name"--pride lit the dim eyes--"of Vauvenargues."

THE END

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